

**Point/Counterpoint**      **“Incivility, social undermining, bullying. . .oh my!”: A call to reconcile constructs within workplace aggression research**

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**Summary**      Research in the field of workplace aggression has rapidly developed in the last two decades, and with this growth has come an abundance of overlapping constructs that fall under the broad rubric of workplace aggression. While researchers have conceptually distinguished these constructs, it is unclear whether this proliferation of constructs is adding appreciably to our knowledge, or whether it is constraining the questions we ask. In this paper, I consider five example constructs (i.e., abusive supervision, bullying, incivility, social undermining, and interpersonal conflict) and argue that the manner in which we have differentiated these (and other) aggression constructs does not add appreciably to our knowledge of workplace aggression. I then provide supplementary meta-analytic evidence to show that there is not a predictable pattern of outcomes from these constructs, and propose a restructuring of the manner in which we conceptualize workplace aggression. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## **Introduction**

Over the last 15 years, research in the area of workplace mistreatment has exploded. This body of research has created a wealth of knowledge about interpersonal relations in the workplace, and has culminated in meta-analytic evidence that identifies many of the predictors and outcomes of mistreatment at work (see Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Hershcovis et al., 2007). The literature examining mistreatment from the target’s perspective has developed numerous constructs, including bullying (e.g., Rayner, 1997), incivility (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999), social undermining (e.g., Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), mobbing (e.g., Leymann, 1990), workplace aggression (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 1998), emotional abuse (e.g., Keashly, Hunter, & Harvey, 1997), victimization (e.g., Aquino, Grover, Bradfield, & Allen, 1999), interpersonal conflict (e.g., Spector & Jex, 1998), and abusive supervision (e.g., Tepper, 2000). Similarly, researchers investigating the actor’s perspective have examined a variety of forms of enacted mistreatment, including anti-social behavior

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(Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998), counterproductive work behaviors (Fox & Spector, 1999), interpersonal deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2000), retaliation (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), revenge (e.g., Aquino, Bies, & Tripp, 1999), and workplace aggression (e.g., Greenberg & Barling, 1999). While each of these constructs has key distinguishing features, there is also considerable definitional, conceptual, and measurement overlap (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Fox & Spector, 2005). The broad objective of this paper is to consider this overlap and to generate some discussion and a proposal for reconciling the field.

While there is no question that the workplace mistreatment literature has yielded valuable insights, the field has reached a point at which construct proliferation and overlap demand a synthesis. To that end, a professional development workshop at the 2008 Academy of Management conference (Raver, 2008) brought together 11 expert speakers and almost 50 researchers from various topic domains in the area of workplace mistreatment. A key issue identified within this workshop was the concern that the field is becoming fragmented, with the development of numerous overlapping constructs that largely examine the same relationships. As noted by Charlotte Rayner at that symposium, “if we forget to stand on the shoulder of giants, we stand to reinvent the wheel.”

This workshop is not the first time that this concern has been raised. For example, Fox and Spector (2005) devoted an edited book to the examination of the different constructs within this domain, and similarly argued that we should consider integration and synthesis rather than focusing solely on differentiating our work. Raver and Barling (2008) and Hershcovis and Barling (2007) raise similar concerns, and more recently, Aquino and Thau (2009) argued that overlap might be impeding theoretical development in this literature, and suggested the need for an empirical assessment of whether various mistreatment measures in fact tap a common construct. Nevertheless, the development of multiple constructs, with champions behind each of those constructs, makes a critical assessment of the necessity and value-added of each existing and new construct difficult. This paper aims to open a debate about whether the concepts and questions that drive each construct can be examined in a more parsimonious and integrative manner.

In an effort to bring some order to the workplace mistreatment literature, I therefore raise two research questions. First, is construct differentiation and proliferation yielding new insights? Second, is it feasible to reconfigure these constructs to enable their examination in a more concise and informative manner? I answer the first question by conducting a qualitative review and as suggested by Aquino and Thau (2009), I empirically assess construct overlap and present some supplementary meta-analytic evidence. I then turn to the second question, which proposes one possible way to reconfigure the current state of the field. The goal is not to present a conclusion, but to generate conversation and research to help address the questions and ideas raised by researchers in this field. While the following overview and subsequent critique focus primarily on the literature investigating workplace mistreatment from the target’s perspective, these concerns also apply to the actor’s perspective.

## Considering the Similarities and Differences of Mistreatment Constructs

A recent meta-analysis by Bowling and Beehr (2006) examined the predictors and consequences of workplace mistreatment. Within their meta-analysis of mistreatment outcomes, Bowling and Beehr combined multiple forms of mistreatment including abusive supervision, bullying, emotional abuse, generalized workplace abuse, incivility, interpersonal conflict, mobbing, social undermining, victimization, and workplace aggression. Bowling and Beehr combined the correlational relationships

among all of these mistreatment variables and their outcomes, with the exception that they included a sub-analysis comparing interpersonal conflict to the remaining mistreatment measures combined. Implicit in this decision to aggregate all mistreatment measures was the assumption that each form of mistreatment is largely the same. They argued that this research “appears under many different labels. . . but each label refers to the same overall construct” (p. 998). Despite this claim, those who developed each of these constructs would likely debate this point. Indeed, they developed the constructs and scales for each of these measures on the basis that they differ substantively from existing constructs in the field. I therefore consider the similarities and differences of five example mistreatment constructs studied in the literature. These sample constructs include: Abusive supervision, bullying, incivility, social undermining, and interpersonal conflict. Table 1 includes the definitions, distinguishing features, assumptions, and sample items for each of these variables (see Spector & Fox, 2005 for a similar chart demonstrating overlap in actor mistreatment).

### *Abusive supervision*

Abusive supervision refers to the “sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000: p. 178). This construct differs from other mistreatment constructs in that it focuses on one particular perpetrator, specifically the supervisor. Implicit in the decision to examine mistreatment from supervisors is the idea that supervisor mistreatment is different either in content or in consequence from mistreatment from other perpetrators (e.g., co-workers, customers, subordinates). With the exception of Duffy et al.’s (2002) social undermining construct (discussed below), and some variations of the bullying measure (e.g., Keashly & Neuman, 2004) the other three constructs do not distinguish or identify the perpetrator within the construct definition or measure.

A second differentiating feature of this construct from other mistreatment constructs is the notion that the behavior is *sustained*. That is, according to the definition, one or two abusive acts from a supervisor do not constitute abusive supervision. Other constructs vary on the extent to which they consider the frequency or persistence of mistreatment. For instance, social undermining does not explicitly mention frequency; however, the definition suggests that the behavior hinders relationships over time, implying moderate or high frequency. In contrast, bullying (explored in more detail below) explicitly states that the mistreatment must be persistent.

A final factor that distinguishes abusive supervision from other constructs is that it explicitly omits physical acts from its definition. While supervisors may be physically abusive, Tepper (2000) conceptualizes abusive supervision in a non-physical sense. Abusive supervision is not the only construct that omits physical behavior; as noted below, incivility also excludes physical acts. Further, while social undermining does not explicitly mention physical acts, its measurement excludes physical behaviors.

### *Bullying*

Bullying is defined as instances where an employee is repeatedly and over a period of time exposed to negative acts (i.e., constant abuse, offensive remarks or teasing, ridicule, or social exclusion) from co-workers, supervisors, or subordinates (Einarsen, 2000). In contrast to abusive supervision, bullying can be perpetrated by any organizational member although the definition seems to exclude organizational outsiders such as customers. Given that bullying can come from any source, the measure of bullying

Table 1. Construct definitions, assumptions, and sample overlapping items

Construct and Definition	Construct Assumptions and Distinguishing Characteristics	Sample of Items that Overlap with Other Measures
<p><b>Social Undermining</b></p> <p><b>Definition:</b> Behavior intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation (Duffy, Ganster, &amp; Pagon, 2002)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Intent</li> <li>▪ Affects specific outcomes including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Relationships</li> <li>○ Reputation</li> <li>○ Work-related success</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Put you down when you questioned work procedures (S)</li> <li>▪ Talked bad about you behind your back (S &amp; C)</li> <li>▪ Insulted you (S &amp; C)</li> <li>▪ Spread rumors about you (S &amp; C)</li> <li>▪ Made you feel incompetent (S)</li> <li>▪ Delayed work to make you look bad or slow you down (S &amp; C)</li> <li>▪ Talked down to you (S)</li> <li>▪ Gave you the silent treatment (S &amp; C)</li> <li>▪ Belittled you or your ideas (S &amp; C)</li> <li>▪ Criticized the way you handled things on the job in a way that was not helpful (C)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Incivility</b></p> <p><b>Definition:</b> Low intensity deviant acts, such as rude and discourteous verbal and non-verbal behaviors enacted towards another organizational member with ambiguous intent to harm (Andersson &amp; Pearson, 1999).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Low intensity</li> <li>▪ Ambiguous intent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Put you down in a condescending way</li> <li>▪ Made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you</li> <li>▪ Paid little attention to your statement or showed little interest in your opinion</li> <li>▪ Ignored or excluded you from social camaraderie</li> <li>▪ Made unwanted attempts to draw you into discussion of personal matters</li> </ul>
<p><b>Bullying</b></p> <p><b>Definition:</b> Situations where a person repeatedly and over a period of time is exposed to negative acts (i.e. constant abuse, offensive remarks or teasing, ridicule or social exclusion) on the part of co-workers, supervisors or subordinates (Einarsen, 2000).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Persistent</li> <li>▪ Frequent</li> <li>▪ Power imbalance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ridicule</li> <li>▪ Repeated reminders of your blunders</li> <li>▪ Insulting teasing</li> <li>▪ Slander or rumors about you</li> <li>▪ Social exclusion from co-workers or work group activities</li> <li>▪ Verbal abuse</li> <li>▪ Devaluation of your work and efforts</li> <li>▪ Neglect of your opinions or views</li> </ul>
<p><b>Abusive Supervision</b></p> <p><b>Definition:</b> The sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Excludes physical contact</li> <li>▪ Experience of aggression from a supervisor is different from experience of aggression from someone else</li> <li>▪ Sustained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ridicules me</li> <li>▪ Gives me the silent treatment</li> <li>▪ Puts me down in front of others</li> <li>▪ Invades my privacy</li> <li>▪ Reminds me of my past mistakes or failures</li> <li>▪ Makes negative comments to me about others</li> <li>▪ Is rude to me</li> <li>▪ Tells me I'm incompetent</li> </ul>
<p><b>Interpersonal Conflict</b></p> <p><b>Definition:</b> An organizational stressor involving disagreements between employees (Spector &amp; Jex, 1998).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No clear differentiating features</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How often are people rude to you at work?</li> <li>▪ How often do other people do nasty things to you at work?</li> <li>▪ How often do people yell at you at work?</li> </ul>

does not identify source within the measure as do measures of abusive supervision and social undermining.

A second distinguishing feature of bullying is that, among mistreatment constructs, it clearly emphasizes the persistent and sustained nature of the behaviors. While other measures, such as abusive supervision, suggest that bullying is a sustained behavior, bullying researchers often include in their analysis only those participants that identify more than one act of bullying over a sustained period. The implication of this distinction is that frequency and persistence somehow differentiates this negative act from other forms of mistreatment at work.

While not an explicit feature of bullying, researchers in the bullying domain (e.g., Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001) argue that bullying generally occurs when there is a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the target. In particular, the perpetrator is thought to have greater power than the target; however, power is defined broadly to include anything from formal or social position, to age, job tenure, or gender. With the exception of abusive supervision, which originates from someone in a formal power position, and social undermining, which separately considers supervisor and co-worker undermining, other constructs do not specify power imbalance as a defining feature.

### *Incivility*

Incivility has recently emerged as one of the most studied variables in the workplace mistreatment literature, with several recent published (e.g., Blau & Andersson, 2005; Cortina, 2008; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Milam, Spitzmueller, & Penny, 2009) and unpublished papers available (e.g., Crocker, Harris, & Stetz, 2005; Lim & Chin, 2007; Mohr, Warren, & Hodgson, 2007). It was defined by Andersson and Pearson (1999) as low intensity deviant acts such as rude and discourteous verbal and non-verbal behaviors enacted toward another organizational member with ambiguous intent to harm. This construct differentiates itself from other constructs on several dimensions. First, it is defined as a low intensity behavior. Andersson and Pearson explicitly argue that minor forms of mistreatment can have a significant impact on employee attitudes toward the organization. In contrast, most other mistreatment constructs are not defined in terms of their intensity, though intensity may be inferred by their definition or measurement. For example, bullying can be assumed to be of higher intensity than incivility because of its persistence and frequency.

A second differentiating feature of incivility is the explicit statement that intent is ambiguous. Researchers in the workplace mistreatment literature have frequently debated the notion of intent. For instance, Neuman and Baron (2005) argued that when defining mistreatment from the perspective of the actor, intent is crucial. Otherwise, accidentally harmful behaviors such as being hurt by a dentist during a dental procedure may be considered aggressive. On the other hand, from a target's perspective, perceived intent may be all that matters because victims will react based on their perception, whether or not their perception is accurate.

### *Social undermining*

Social undermining is defined as "behavior intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation" (Duffy et al., 2002: p. 332). Social undermining differs from other constructs in the field in that it is concerned with the manner in which perpetrators can harm the relationships and success of its victims. While

other mistreatment constructs do not specify the type of harm victims will experience, this construct is explicit about its outcomes.

Three key assumptions are evident within the definition of social undermining. First, in contrast to incivility, where intent is ambiguous, this construct assumes intent on the part of the perpetrator. Second and most notably, this construct implies an interference with relationships at work. In particular, this construct assumes that in the act of undermining a victim, the attitudes and behaviors of third parties (e.g., co-workers or supervisors) toward the victim are influenced. Third, social undermining assumes particular outcomes within the definition. That is, social undermining should interfere with social relationships, should diminish the work-related success of victims, and should hinder victims' reputations.

### *Interpersonal conflict*

Interpersonal conflict is an organizational stressor involving disagreement between employees (Spector & Jex, 1998). It differs from other constructs studied in this literature, largely because the variable was intended to measure a mutually stressful interaction (i.e., conflict with another person) rather than an experienced outcome. Nevertheless, it has been included as a form of mistreatment in many studies, and was included as part of Bowling and Beehr's (2006) meta-analysis. In terms of intensity, this construct ranges from minor to major, and is intended to capture overt and covert behaviors (Spector & Jex, 1998). Whereas the other measures in this section focus exclusively on a target's experience of negative behaviors, this construct includes one item asking about a respondent's enacted conflict (i.e., "how often do you get into arguments with others at work?"). The remaining items ask about the respondent's experience, which is likely why it has been included with other mistreatment variables in meta-analyses (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006).

### *Actor's perspective*

For the sake of clarity, I focus largely on the target or victim's perspective in this paper. However, research on workplace mistreatment from the actor's perspective faces similar construct overlap. Researchers (e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995) have shown that enacted mistreatment can be targeted at both an individual (i.e., interpersonal mistreatment) and the organization (i.e., organizational mistreatment). Interpersonal mistreatment is targeted at individuals and it parallels the forms of mistreatment that I discussed above; however, this literature focuses on the predictors rather than the outcomes of this form of mistreatment.

The literature on enacted mistreatment includes highly overlapping constructs that in some cases are virtually identical. For example, counterproductive work behaviors are defined as "serious and minor deviance directed at organizational and personal targets" (Fox & Spector, 1999: p. 915). Workplace deviance is defined as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in doing so, threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both" (Robinson & Bennett, 1995: p. 349). Both these forms of mistreatment are considered to be intentional, include behaviors that range in severity, are aimed at the organization or a person, and are purported to result in harm. Other constructs such as anti-social behaviors (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998) are similar, except they generally do not distinguish between interpersonal and organizational targets within the conceptualization or measure. To illustrate my concerns about construct overlap, I focus my critique below on the target side. However, as I address in the section on future challenges, these critiques also apply to the actor side.

## Construct Critique

The preceding section identified some key overlapping and differentiating characteristics of five mistreatment constructs. These are summarized in Table 1 and include: (1) Intensity, (2) frequency, (3) perpetrator power/position, (4) outcomes to be affected, and (5) intent. All the constructs presented above can be conceptually differentiated from each other. Each construct possesses important distinctions that likely represent critical experiential differences to the victim. For instance, perceived intent likely does influence the way a victim interprets and reacts to mistreatment. Frequent mistreatment may indeed have stronger adverse effects on victims. And perpetrators high in power undoubtedly harm victims in different ways and perhaps more severely than those lower in power (Hershcovis & Barling, 2007; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). Importantly, however, while each of these constructs differentiates itself theoretically, these differences are *assumptions of the definition and conceptualization*. Researchers have not tended to measure the factors (i.e., persistence, power, intent, intensity) that make these constructs different.

Consider social undermining as an example. This construct is conceptualized as a set of behaviors that are intended to interfere with employee success and social relationships. However, researchers have relied on its measurement to assess this by including items such as “delayed work to make you look bad. . .” and “gave you misleading information. . .” As shown in Table 1, the items in the various measures discussed in this paper overlap considerably; therefore, it is not clear that interfering with success and social relationships falls exclusively within the domain of social undermining. Bullying and abusive supervision may also interfere with success and social relationships, suggesting that this construct may not truly be different than other mistreatment constructs. Further, studies that have examined social undermining have examined such outcomes as job satisfaction, intent to quit, and counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006), rather than examining interference with social relationships and employee success. What, then, operationally differentiates social undermining from other forms of mistreatment?

This is not to say that the concept of social undermining is invalid. Understanding whether and how aggressive incidents affect employee success and relationships is a crucial research question. Nevertheless, this question has not and cannot adequately be addressed by distinguishing social undermining as a separate construct from others and assuming it has effects on these outcomes. To investigate social undermining comprehensively, one would need to assess how aggressive behaviors affect third parties (i.e., the co-workers and supervisors they are purported to influence) by investigating how such behaviors affect co-workers’ and supervisors’ attitudes and behaviors toward targets (Reich & Hershcovis, 2008). Rather than assuming these outcomes within the definition, these behaviors should be examined empirically using research methods appropriate to the question (i.e., investigating the third-party observer rather than the victim).

Similarly, workplace incivility is defined as a low intensity behavior with ambiguous intent, while workplace bullying is assumed to have high intensity and intent. Despite differentiating itself based on intensity and intent, the measurement of workplace incivility does not examine either intensity or intent (Raver & Barling, 2008). Therefore, similar to the other mistreatment constructs, intent and intensity are *assumptions* of the construct. That is, although the incivility measure purports to ask about low intensity behaviors, the items may or may not be of low intensity from the perspective of the victim. For example, items in the incivility scale include being “ignored or excluded. . . from social camaraderie.” Research by Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggests that belongingness is a fundamental need for all individuals. Their research suggests that exclusion is far from low in intensity. Indeed, they review a vast literature that demonstrates that exclusion results in severe health, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences, and that negative social processes such as social exclusion have effects of greater

magnitude than positive ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). On the other hand, if an individual has a strong social support network in- or outside of work, perhaps exclusion might be of less importance. Therefore, this behavior may mean different things to different people. Rather than assuming intensity as part of a definition, it seems that measuring such moderating factors as intensity separately would better enable us to answer the question: Do low intensity behaviors adversely affect employees?

In short, while it is clear that the array of mistreatment constructs considered in this study are distinct conceptually, the manner in which they are measured prevents us from understanding how each of these distinctions affects the victims' experience, outcomes, and coping strategies.

## Supplementary Meta-analytic Evidence

Despite the arguments above, it is plausible that we will find that the variables are empirically distinguishable. Based on the aforementioned differentiating factors, one should be able to make some basic predictions about the expected differential effects of these constructs. For example, bullying is argued to be a frequent, high intensity, intended behavior perpetrated by someone with power, whereas incivility is a low intensity behavior with ambiguous frequency and intent, perpetrated by anyone at work. Based on theories of social exchange, power, and influence, one would predict that bullying would have stronger adverse effects on attitudes and behaviors than incivility (H1). Similarly, since abusive supervision is defined as frequent negative acts perpetrated by someone with power, whereas incivility is not necessarily perpetrated by someone with high power and is not necessarily persistent, one would expect abusive supervision to have stronger adverse effects on attitudes and behaviors than incivility (H2). More generally, I conduct a comparison between four of the five types of mistreatment and attitudinal (i.e., job satisfaction, turnover intent, and affective commitment) and well-being (i.e., psychological and physical) outcomes to determine whether any patterns emerge. I exclude social undermining from this analysis because it has not been studied with enough frequency. Nevertheless, I felt it important to include this emerging construct in my qualitative review and critique because it represents a concrete example of a construct that is different in conceptualization but not in execution.

### *Method*

I conducted a comprehensive literature search by first searching major databases (e.g., PsychINFO and ProQuest), reviewing the reference lists of recent citations, and searching for unpublished articles at major conferences (e.g., *Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management*, and *Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology*). Studies were retained if they included correlations between one of the relevant constructs and one or more of the outcome variables of interest. The final sample included 53 studies and 60 samples.

To keep the analyses as clean as possible, the mistreatment relationships were restricted as follows: (1) Only studies that measure incivility using Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout's measure were included in the incivility analyses; (2) only those studies using Spector and Jex's (1998) measure of interpersonal conflict at work were included in the interpersonal conflict analyses; and (3) only those samples that used either the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997), a close variation of the NAQ, or Leymann's Inventory of Psychological Terrorization (Leymann, 1989) to



examine bullying were included in the bullying analyses. The two measures have many overlapping and similar items. The only exception was for abusive supervision, for which I conducted two separate analyses. First, I analyzed only those studies that measured abusive supervision using Tepper's (2000) measure. Second, I combined all studies that looked at mistreatment from a supervisor, regardless of the measure. For example, Ashforth (1997) looked at petty tyranny (a form of supervisor mistreatment) and Raver (2004) examined interpersonal mistreatment from a supervisor. Since abusive supervision distinguishes itself from other constructs largely based on perpetrator, it seemed appropriate to conduct an analysis that combined all measures that identified the supervisor as the perpetrator within the measure. Tables 2 and 3 show the results of these analyses with only Tepper's abusive supervision measure, and then with an all-inclusive supervisor mistreatment (shown in brackets). The studies that use an alternative abusive supervision measure are identified with a double-asterisk in the references; whereas, the remaining studies included in the analyses are identified with a single asterisk.<sup>1</sup>

### Results

Table 2 presents the mean correlations and standard deviations between each construct and the outcome variable of interest. Table 3 provides the confidence intervals. Overlapping confidence intervals suggests that there is no significant difference between the constructs with respect to a given outcome. Hypothesis 1 and 2 predicted that bullying and abusive supervision would have significantly stronger outcomes than incivility on all outcome variables. As shown in Table 3, with the exception of physical well-being, bullying did not have a significantly stronger correlation than incivility in relation to the outcome variables. Abusive supervision did not have a significantly stronger correlation with any of the outcome variables. However, incivility had a significantly stronger relationship with job satisfaction than interpersonal conflict, and a significantly stronger relationship with turnover intent than bullying and interpersonal conflict. These results fail to support Hypotheses 1 and 2.

More generally, an examination of the confidence intervals presented in Table 3 reveals that for only seven of the 25 possible comparisons are there statistically significant differences between correlations. In addition to the four differences discussed above, bullying had a statistically stronger relationship than abusive supervision in relation to physical and psychological well-being. Lastly, bullying had a stronger relationship with physical well-being than did interpersonal conflict. All other comparisons are non-significant.

## Construct Clean-up Time

The field of workplace mistreatment is fragmented, and this fragmentation is precluding us from answering the questions that are implied by the distinctions between constructs. The result is a body of studies measuring highly similar constructs with respect to the same outcomes and, not surprisingly,

<sup>1</sup>There were five instances in which there was crossover between studies included in the analyses for different types of mistreatment. Specifically, Liu's (2003; two samples), Frone (2000), and Frone (2004) separated interpersonal conflict into supervisor and co-worker conflict. For the purposes of this meta-analysis, I made the choice to include co-worker interpersonal conflict in the interpersonal conflict analysis, and supervisor interpersonal conflict into the aggregated supervisor aggression analysis. Similarly, Perez and Riley (2006) measured incivility from multiple sources. Again, I included co-worker incivility in the incivility category, and supervisor incivility in the aggregated supervisor aggression analysis.

Table 2. Correlations between different forms of mistreatment and outcome variables

	Incivility			Abusive supervision (all supervisor-initiated aggression)			Bullying			Interpersonal conflict						
	K	N	r	SD	K	N	r	SD	K	N	r	SD	K	N	r	SD
Job satisfaction	12	6099	-.40	.08	4	789	-.35	.12	4	6573	-.39	.07	15	7096	-.29	.06
Turnover intent	11	5861	.36	.07	(12)	(6019)	(-.34)	.07	4	7160	.35	.05	9	4347	.33	.12
Psychological well-being	11	5782	-.33	.15	(12)	(6478)	(.30)	.07	11	7308	-.40	.06	8	3768	-.35	.05
Physical well-being	6	3242	-.17	.15	(15)	(4633)	(-.30)	(.11)	6	6147	-.32	.04	14	5054	-.16	.10
Affective commitment	6	3704	-.31	.11	(12)	(5455)	(-.15)	.11	5	977	-.26	.06	2	2719	-.21	.14
					(12)	(5041)	(-.24)	.07								

Note: K, number of studies; N, total sample size; r, average weighted correlation; SD, standard deviation of r.

Table 3. Variable confidence intervals

	Incivility	Abusive supervision (all supervisor-initiated aggression)	Bullying	Interpersonal conflict
Job satisfaction	-.44 to -.35	-.46 to -.23 (-.38 to -.30)	-.45 to -.32	-.32 to -.25
Turnover intent	.33 to .40	— (.22 to .29)	.24 to .33	.21 to .33
Psychological well-being	-.42 to -.24	-.36 to -.24 (-.43 to -.19)	-.43 to -.36	-.38 to -.31
Physical well-being	-.27 to -.06	— (-.21 to -.09)	-.35 to -.29	-.21 to -.10
Affective commitment	-.40 to -.22	-.31 to -.21 (-.28 to -.20)	—	-.41 to -.01

with similar findings. When we do observe different outcomes from one form of mistreatment over another, we cannot interpret the reason for the difference.

I view this fragmented approach as problematic for several reasons. First, there is significant overlap between items within the different measures (see Table 1). For instance, bullying, incivility, and abusive supervision all include items that concern derogatory comments, ignoring or giving the silent treatment, and being rude. Second, the definitions of each construct differ on some dimensions and overlap on others. For instance, bullying and violence are considered to be high intensity behaviors, incivility is considered to be a low intensity behavior, and interpersonal conflict ranges in its intensity. Third, some of the mistreatment variables are defined in terms of their outcomes (e.g., social undermining interferes with relationships and success). Finally, some mistreatment variables are defined in terms of their perpetrators. For example, abusive supervision is an act perpetrated by a supervisor.

Figure 1 depicts a snapshot of the current state of the field. I expand on the five example constructs and include a more comprehensive (though not exhaustive) list of current mistreatment constructs. The left hand side of the diagram outlines these key mistreatment constructs, and some of the definitional features of each. The model itself borrows from the right-hand (i.e., target) side of Bowling and Beehr's (2006) model and, for the sake of parsimony, cannot be representative of all the mistreatment research that has been conducted. Rather, the objective is to take one potential model, and demonstrate how we might reconfigure it to integrate the literature and position ourselves to better answer the questions that we set out to ask.

Notably absent from Bowling and Beehr's (2006) model is a list of possible moderators. I suggest that a reason for this absence may be that the moderators in this field are included as part of the definitions and conceptualizations of the various mistreatment constructs. Figure 2 presents a new model, which I propose as a way forward. This model extracts the overlapping and distinctive features from the various mistreatment definitions, which may be more appropriately placed as moderators, and outcomes of a mistreatment model. The result is a more parsimonious model that includes one broad predictor variable labeled "workplace aggression," a range of moderators discussed in this paper and in prior research (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006), and a range of outcomes, some of which derive from current aggression definitions.

In Figure 2, I list the following potential moderators: Intent, intensity, frequency, perceived invisibility, and perpetrator–victim relationship. These moderators are not exhaustive, and derive from construct overlap outlined in this paper. I discuss each moderator briefly below.

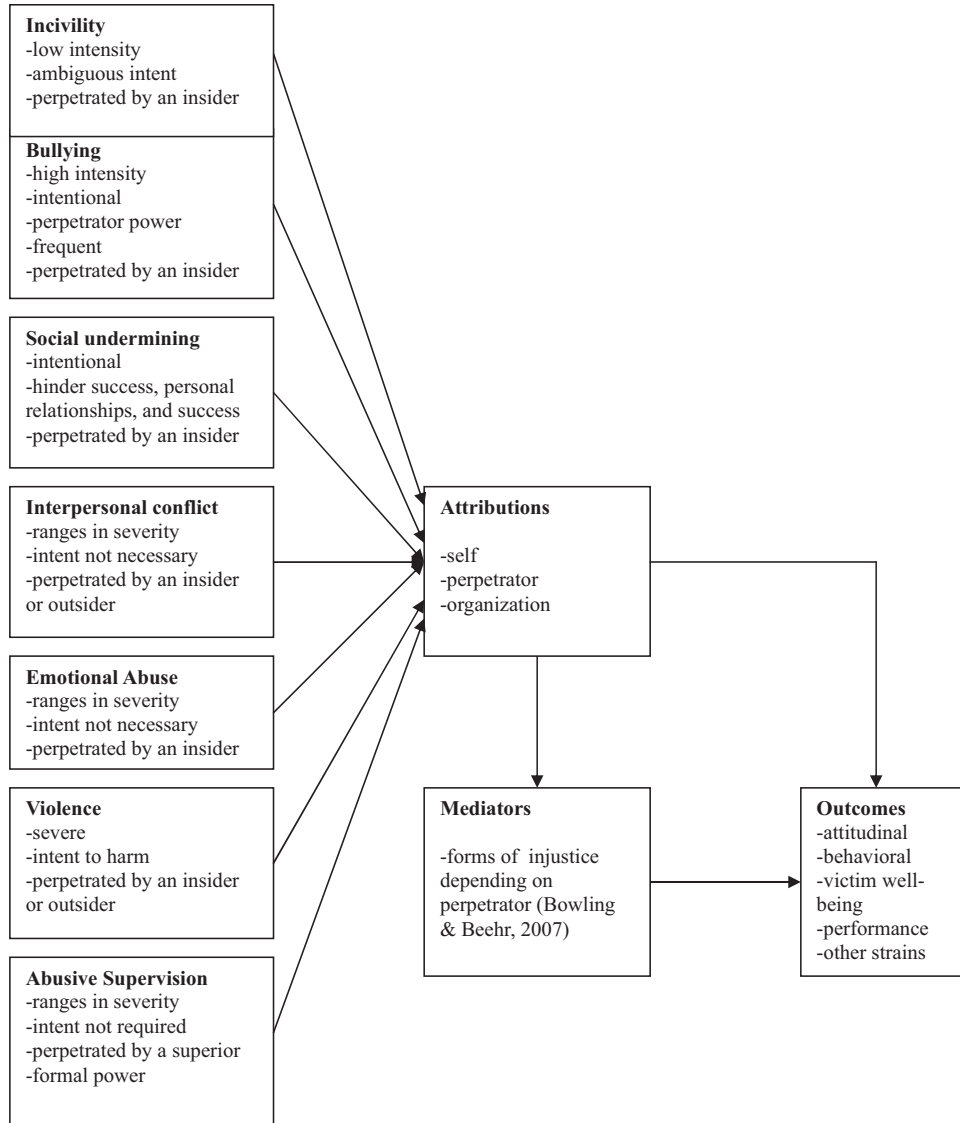


Figure 1. Current state of the field

### *Perceived intent*

Perceived intent refers to the victim's perception about the perpetrator's intention to cause harm. As already noted, some constructs assume intent (e.g., bullying) implying that perceived intent might influence the adverse effects of workplace aggression. Researchers have demonstrated that blame attributions for a perceived transgression is associated with higher levels of revenge behaviors (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). A key aspect of blame attribution is perceived intent, suggesting that perceived intent could exacerbate the negative relationship between experienced aggression and its outcomes.

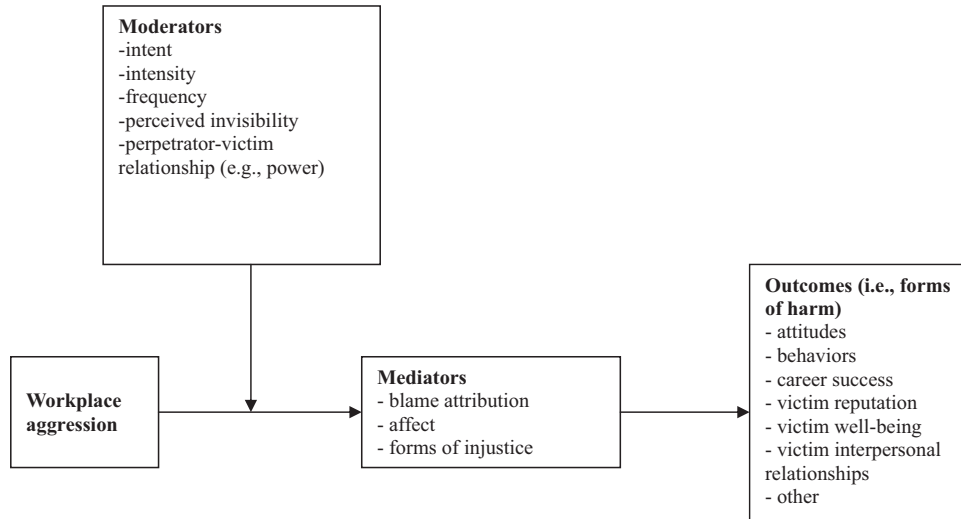


Figure 2. Proposed way forward

### *Perceived intensity*

Perceived intensity refers to the severity or harmfulness the victim attributes to the aggressive behavior (see Barling, 1996). Researchers (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999) assume incivility to be of lower intensity than other forms of aggression, yet argue that these behaviors can be just as detrimental. The conclusions from the current meta-analysis shows no significant differences between incivility and bullying on some of the outcomes, stronger effects for incivility in relation to some outcomes, and stronger effects for bullying in relation to one outcome. These differential results might mean that (1) despite lower intensity, incivility is just as bad as bullying for some outcomes, (2) that incivility is not perceived to have lower intensity, (3) that some other moderator is influencing these relationships. Measuring intensity by directly asking participants the extent to which their experienced aggression was serious or harmful would help to tease apart these possible explanations.

### *Frequency*

Bullying researchers argue that for a behavior to be considered bullying, it has to be frequent. This is sometimes assumed, and sometimes measured by requiring, for example, that the aggressive behavior occurs at least twice within a given period (e.g., per week) to qualify as bullying. The definitional requirement that bullying be frequent assumes that frequent behaviors are worse than infrequent behaviors. Though, Pratt and Barling (1988) suggested a distinction between acute and chronic aggression, due to current measurement techniques, researchers have not considered the extent to which frequency (i.e., chronic aggression) versus perceived intensity (e.g., acute aggression) influence the relationship between aggression and its outcomes. Most measures of workplace aggression include frequency as part of a Likert-type response scale; however, it may be more informative to assess whether an employee has experienced various aggressive behaviors, and incorporate frequency as a moderator.

### *Perceived invisibility*

While not discussed in this paper, perceived invisibility is a dimension of workplace aggression that is implicit in most measures. Researchers (e.g., Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999) have argued that aggression can vary on the extent to which the behavior is covert versus overt. Covert behaviors (e.g., rude looks, ignoring someone) are acts that are subtle in nature, whereas overt behaviors (e.g., yelling) are less subtle and more observable to others. Perceived invisibility refers to the victim's perception about whether third parties are aware of the victims' experiences of aggression. It is unclear whether perceived invisibility would exacerbate or attenuate the affects of aggression on victim outcomes. On the one hand, if aggression is invisible, victims may have no outlet to report the abuse because it becomes the victim's word against the perpetrator's word. On the other hand, research in the justice domain has shown that mistreatment by one individual is a social cue to other individuals about the victim's value or worth to the group (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Therefore, perceived invisibility may spare victims the humiliation of others knowing about (and being influenced by) their aggression experiences.

### *Perpetrator–victim relationship*

In this study, I focused on one aspect of the perpetrator–victim relationships, formal power. Hershcovis and Barling (2010) demonstrated that aggression from supervisors yields stronger relationships with outcomes (e.g., turnover intent, psychological distress) than aggression from co-workers or members of the public. However, they suggested that merely looking at outcomes by perpetrator is inadequate because the degree of formal power depends on more than just the formal role of the perpetrator. For instance, just because a perpetrator is a customer does not mean they do not have power. A customer who is a major client to a lawyer has considerable power over the employee (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007) in comparison to a one-time customer in a convenience store. Therefore, assessing perceived power directly, rather than assuming power based on position, would better assess the extent to which power might moderate the relationship between experienced aggression and its outcomes. Further, other aspects of the perpetrator–victim relationship (e.g., social power, task interdependence, expected relationship endurance) may also moderate this relationship (Hershcovis & Barling, 2007).

Again, the present model is not intended to be exhaustive. Prior studies (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Douglas, Kiewitz, Martinko, Harvey, Kim, & Chun, 2008) have more comprehensively addressed the content of workplace aggression models. My aim here is to address the *structure* of the model by demonstrating that one way to address construct confusion in this field is to remove the overlapping definitional features of different forms of aggression, and instead consider these as contingencies that help explain when, why, and how workplace aggression will affect outcomes and coping strategies. This approach seems useful both because it would help “clean up” the fragmentation in the field, and as suggested by Aquino and Thau (2009), because it would contribute *theoretically* to our understanding of why and when aggression leads to a range of outcomes. Further, it would allow us to ask and answer the questions that thus far we have assumed within our definitions (e.g., Is intent important? To what extent do intensity or severity matter? Does the frequency of the behavior affect the outcome? How does perpetrator power affect the relationship between aggression and its outcomes?).

## **Moving Forward: Three Challenges**

I now pose three challenges we face moving forward, and some suggestions about how to overcome these challenges.

### *Challenge 1: Territoriality*

While the present study suggests a straightforward solution—to remove the assumptions from our conceptualizations and instead examine them as moderators—the implementation of this idea is far from straightforward. A key issue in this literature is that researchers have invested in their constructs, and therefore they are understandably committed to them. The implication of this proposed way forward is that we abandon construct differentiation (Pfeffer, 1993), which implies that we agree on one label and one way to operationalize the broad construct—call it “workplace aggression.”

As noted by Brown, Lawrence, and Robinson (2005), territoriality can have adverse effects on broader goals—in this case, to move the field forward. One way to overcome territoriality is to view this suggestion as change in structure, not a change in intent. As noted in the outset of this paper, I believe there are valuable differences between constructs in this field. I am not suggesting that we stop examining these constructs—I am proposing that we *start* examining them. For example, I suggest that we investigate the extent to which low intensity forms of aggression with ambiguous intent yield negative outcomes. This will mean abandoning current measurement and assessing the target’s perception of intensity and intent—therefore, directly assessing the factors that make incivility different from bullying. Similarly, I propose that we investigate whether aggression can interfere with an employee’s relationships and success, thus assessing the extent to which aggression can result in *social undermining*. The present suggestion does not challenge current constructs; rather, it advocates for them more precisely.

### *Challenge 2: Measurement and methods*

As argued throughout this paper, the current state of the field is such that we have multiple different constructs testing many of the same relationships. Nevertheless, the different constructs imply a range of different questions such as to what extent do (1) attributions of intent, (2) aggression intensity, and (3) perpetrator power affect a target’s experience of workplace aggression. Each of these questions is challenging to study, because of the limitations of the commonly used methods and measures used to study workplace aggression. Existing methods primarily rely on survey data, and existing measures ask individuals about aggression from “someone at work.” To assess intent, intensity, and power, participants must be able to refer to a *particular perpetrator* when answering questions about their aggression experience. Existing methods in this area do not readily permit such an examination, and while experimental methods would be conducive to manipulating aspects of the perpetrator or the aggression, experiments do not capture the on-going nature of the relationship that is likely to affect the experience of and responses to aggression (Berscheid, 1999). Further, with the possible exception of social undermining (as discussed below), it is challenging to ethically conduct experiments of this type.

Two potential ways to study these questions are to (1) conduct an event-based diary study, or (2) examine a critical incident. In both cases, these methods will allow researchers to assess the participants’ specific experiences of aggression, enabling researchers to ask about the target’s attribution of intent, the intensity of the event, and the power of the perpetrator. While these methods present their own challenges such as time and cost in the case of diary studies and reliance on memory in the case of critical incident techniques, they offer the opportunity to examine directly many of the research questions implied by the different constructs in this literature.

Social undermining is an interesting construct because the question implied by this construct is: To what extent does workplace aggression influence the attitudes and behaviors of other organizational members (e.g., co-workers and supervisors) toward the target (Reich & Hershcovis, 2009)? This question would be best answered by examining those third parties directly. An experimental design

would be a suitable way to conduct initial testing of social undermining. For instance, one could use two confederates—one the perpetrator and the other the target—and the participant would be the observer. One would then assess the extent to which workplace aggression influences the participants' attitudes and behaviors toward a given target (or perpetrator).

### *Challenge 3: The actor's perspective*

In this paper, I dealt largely with experienced aggression. However, the front end of the model suffers from the same construct proliferation as the back end. As noted at the outset of the paper, enacted workplace aggression has been investigated under the labels: Revenge (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 2005), deviance (e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2000), counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Spector, Fox, Penney, Bruursema, Goh, & Kessler, 2006), anti-social behaviors (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998), retaliation (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), and workplace aggression (e.g., Greenberg & Barling, 1999).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to comprehensively critique the literature on enacted aggression, this literature suffers from many of the same problems (i.e., conceptual and measurement overlaps; see Hershcovis & Barling, 2007; Raver & Barling, 2008; Spector & Fox, 2005) and challenges (e.g., territoriality) as those presented in the current paper. Whereas the model presented in the current paper looks at the factors that moderate and mediate the relationship between workplace aggression and its outcomes, a similar conversation should be undertaken for the predictors of workplace aggression. For instance, the literature on enacted aggression often assumes a motivation (e.g., revenge, retaliation), assumes the act's effect on the organization (e.g., counter-normative, destructive, justice restoring), and similarly vary in relation to assumptions about intensity, severity, and frequency. A similar examination of this literature may help researchers develop theory and answer such questions as (1) What motivates aggressive behavior? (2) How do perpetrator/target relationships (e.g., power, task-interdependence) affect target-specific aggression?

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I believe we have reached a point at which fragmentation has hindered our progress. A focus on differentiation has hampered our ability to answer the very questions we are asking by differentiating our constructs in the first place. In this paper, I presented some of the seemingly straightforward questions for which we should have answers given current conceptualization of the various mistreatment constructs. However, due at least in part to construct proliferation, many of these questions remain unanswered. In this paper, I propose one possible way forward, and more importantly, urge a broader discussion about the criticisms leveled and the suggestions raised in this paper. Without such discussions, we will continue to ask the right questions, and then implicitly fail to answer them.

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