When leaders victimize: The role of charismatic leaders in facilitating group pressures

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ABSTRACT

We present a conceptual model exploring the process by which employees seek out and process information from their social context in response to victimizing behaviors from their leader. In particular, we explore how charismatic leaders with personalized values can facilitate group processes whereby group members pressure the target into conforming. Followers of charismatic leaders have been found to ingratiate themselves with, and revere, their leader. This creates the potential for followers to prematurely comply with destructive behaviors from their leader. Research on social influence is drawn upon to theorize how targets who experience confusion about victimizing behaviors can become particularly susceptible to group pressures to conform. Through our theoretical model, we advance theory on the potential dark side of charismatic leadership, specifically how personalized charismatic leaders may trigger negative consequences for the target, group, and organization. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications and propose avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

Participants maintained that *it was only in retrospect* that they were able to identify when the experience of bullying began. During the initial onset period, being immersed in their work, *they did not realize that they were being bullied*…When they did become aware of the change in the bully's behavior towards them, they attributed it to the oppressive work environment (emphasis added) (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010: p. 109).

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing stream of research on workplace victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Researchers have reported that approximately 40–50% of employees in U.S. workplaces have experienced victimization such as workplace aggression (Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006) and bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007) over a period of two years. Of these behaviors, the most prevalent forms are relatively ambiguous and subtle (Neuman & Baron, 1998). In other words, these behaviors are not immediately obvious and can be difficult to recognize (Cortina, 2008; Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Tepper, 2000, 2007). The quote cited above illustrates how targets may fail to recognize that they are being victimized. Interestingly, even when targets later realized the change in behavior, they attributed it to the environment rather than the perpetrator.

In referring to workplace bullying, Parzefall and Salin recently called for research that investigates targets' perceptions and stated, "To date very limited attempts have been made to understand the mechanisms and processes through which the experience of workplace bullying evolves" (2010: p. 762). They later described the literature on perceptions of victimization as "under-theorized" (2010: p. 774). Hershcovis and Barling (2010) similarly concluded their study on workplace victimization with a call for future research that explores targets' attributional mechanisms. Hence, further elucidation on the cognitive and psychological processes of

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targets can provide a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which targets perceive and mentally encode victimizing behaviors.

We integrate research on social information processing (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and social influence (Kelman, 1958) to examine how the social context shapes the way in which targets construe victimizing behaviors. Charismatic leaders can play an important role in this process because of their ability to induce approval from followers and facilitate collective behaviors among group members (Conger, 1990; Howell & Shamir, 2005). Moreover, charismatic leaders with personalized values, which suggest a desire to accumulate personal power, may engage in victimizing behaviors given their potential to exploit and manipulate followers (Conger, 1990; Kets de Vries, 1993). Group members of the target, who may revere their leader, may signal social cues that shape targets' interpretation. Demonstrating the central role of social cues in information processing, early empirical research supported Salancik and Pfeffer's (1978) position that social cues (e.g., interaction with group members) are more influential on perceptions and subsequent reactions than the actual objective characteristic (e.g., task design and behavior) that one is exposed to (e.g., Blau & Katerberg, 1982; O'Reilly & Caldwell, 1979; White & Mitchell, 1979). Social information processing theory, therefore, suggests that charismatic leaders and group members may have a stronger influence in shaping targets' perceptions and reactions through social cues than the actual victimizing behavior.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, we advance understanding of the potential influence that charismatic leaders can have on targets' and group members' perceptions about victimizing behaviors from their leader. While research on charismatic leaders has largely focused on dyadic processes, we theorize the under-researched influence that these leaders may have on group processes (Waldman & Javidan, 2009). Moreover, we also extend research on workplace victimization by carving out the key role of group processes and pressures in facilitating social cues that can induce conformity from targets. The processes theorized also shed light on the role that leadership can play in explaining why targets may not realize that they are being victimized, as evident in the opening quote (e.g., D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010).

Second, we extend social psychology and cognitive-based research in the workplace victimization literature including attribution (e.g., Douglas et al., 2008; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011) and information processing (e.g., Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006; Glomb & Liao, 2003; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998) by elucidating how charismatic leaders may influence attribution and information processing mechanisms. We further build on this research by exploring how information processing is shaped by social cues. Interpretations of victimizing behaviors are important because perpetrators often observe targets' reactions to their behaviors (Leck & Galperin, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). When targets do not initially react in opposition, perpetrators tend to perceive this as a signal of the target's acceptance of the behaviors (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). Later reactions will then typically be viewed as an over-reaction, which shifts the blame for a reaction onto the target (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011). This can have long-term consequences for targets and leave them vulnerable to the perpetrator.

Third, we extend the workplace victimization literature through a comprehensive application of social information processing theory by exploring the broad process from early victimizing behaviors, interpretation, leadership, social influence, and outcomes. In this process, we investigate the personalized charismatic leader as a perpetrator of victimizing behaviors. This sheds new light on how the charismatic leader may victimize followers within the work group.

In this paper, we first provide an overview of workplace victimization and social information processing theory. We then develop and present a conceptual model that illustrates how charismatic leaders can play a vital role in shaping group pressures toward the target to conform. Finally, we conclude with theoretical and practical implications and propose directions for future research.

2. Workplace victimization and social information processing

2.1. Workplace victimization

Workplace victimization is a broad umbrella term that encompasses a number of research streams including abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007), workplace incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011), and workplace aggression (Hershcovis et al., 2007), among others. While we acknowledge the arguments for treating these constructs distinctly (e.g., Tepper & Henle, 2011), we concur with Hershcovis (2011) call to aggregate these streams to limit construct proliferation. Moreover, our analysis of victimizing behaviors applies similarly to the behaviors underlying all of these constructs. Therefore, we focus more broadly on the construct of workplace victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

While workplace victimization reflects negative behaviors that involve some degree of harm to the employee, these behaviors do not necessarily require the target to recognize that he/she is being victimized (see Cortina, 2008; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Hoel & Beale, 2006). This is an important point because different individuals will process information differently, which will be influenced by the social context that surrounds them. We contend that employees' lack of recognition that certain acts represent victimization should not deter researchers from labeling them as such. Workplace victimization can range from explicit forms such as physical violence and harsh insults to more ambiguous forms such as work overload, excessive monitoring, and persistent criticism (Salin, 2003). However, the most common forms reported are often of a subtle and ambiguous nature (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Neuman & Baron, 1998).

The level of ambiguity of the victimizing behaviors refers to the extent to which the negative acts are difficult to recognize and may induce several possible interpretations (Neuman & Baron, 1998; Salin, 2003). While we do not discount the importance of investigating clearer and explicit forms of victimization, we find it surprising that theorizing on ambiguous forms has received sparse attention given its greater prevalence. Indeed, a focus on ambiguous victimizing behaviors entails a number of important implications for the target's ability to process information about the acts.