**When Darkness Meets Leadership: Rethinking Workplace Mistreatment as a Possibly Integrated (Dark) Leadership Style: The Case of Incivility.**

**Abstract**

The overreaching goal of this article is to frame mistreatment as a leadership facet. A review of the concept of mistreatment through incivility, a specific form of mistreatment, and an analysis of data taken in Israel from different populations across time establish the notion that mistreatment is a leadership trait. The current context is placing more stress than ever on the performance of leadership. Since stress can generate mistreatment, it is important to explore this notion of incivility as a leadership characteristic. Such a change in the perception of leadership is necessary to bring about more accurate interventions of mistreatment.

**Introduction**

The topic of leadership and leader behavior is one of the most studied issues in management literature, where numerous studies try to explore specific traits, behaviors, and leadership styles that lead towards successful leadership and positive follower outcomes (Tepper, 2007; Schmidt, 2008). The full range of leadership (FRL) introduced by Bass and Avolio during the 1990s ( Bass 1997; Antonakis *et al.,* 2003) has strongly influenced leadership theory and practice, presenting one of the most widely accepted models of leadership that can optimize organizational effectiveness (Smith *et al.,* 2004; Guhr *et al.,* 2019).

Despite its impact on theory and practice, the model has a few shortcomings (Einarsen, *et al.,* 2007; Krasikova *et al.,* 2013; Jensen *et al.,* 2019). One of these shortcomings is that several aspects of leadership behaviors are not included in the model, such as the variety of forms of leadership characterized as "destructive" (e.g., abusive supervision and petty tyranny). Most existing literature focuses on constructive leaders behavior and sees leadership by definition as being only positive (Padilla et al., 2007; Schyns and Schilling, 2013). However, in the last couple of decades, researchers have acknowledge that there are also negative sides of leader behavior, namely, the destructive or dark side of leadership (Higgs, 2009; Thoroughgood *et al.,* 2018). These destructive facets of leadership are expressed through various terms which are included under the broader characterization of workplace mistreatment.

Workplace mistreatment is a broad term consisting of a wide range of interpersonal harms that employees might experience while at work.

It is an extended or overarching term, capturing a range of more specific abuses and insults that workers may encounter, often routinely, in their workplace. It can include indiscriminate discourteous and disrespectful treatment, more targeted, personalized abuse, or more generalized unreasonable treatment where management practices and procedures are offensive, demeaning or used in a way that undermines confidence. (Hodgins et al., 2014, p.54).

The negative impact of these mistreatments at work is unquestionable (Hodgins et al., 2014; Itzkovich & Heilbrunn, 2016; Schilpzand et al., 2016). Indeed workplace mistreatment is associated with psychological distress, burnout, anxiety, depression, and general reduced wellbeing, all of which are named by Schilpzand, De Pater, and Erez as affective outcomes (2016). Schilpzand et al. (2016) observed two additional categories of effect: attitudinal outcomes - targets of mistreatment are less motivated and less committed and their satisfaction from their coworkers and managers is decreased. These attitudinal outcomes trigger the third category of behavioral impacts. In this respect, Itzkovich and Heilbrunn (2016) noted that as a retaliation reaction, employees tend to damage the organization property and the production processes.

Due to its impact, the academic field that has been dedicated to the study and mapping of workplace mistreatment has become inundated with different definitions and research tools. These definitions collapse into two main categories. The first category is directly related to the aggressors' status, and it is focused on power gaps between aggressors and their victims. Such definitions trace back offensive behaviors to a specific class of aggressors: those who rank higher than their victims on the organizational hierarchy. Such interpersonal mistreatment behaviors have been defined, among other terms, as interactional justice, petty tyranny, abusive supervision, toxic leadership, and destructive leadership. As aggressive behaviors are often perpetrated by individuals who rank higher than their victims in the organizational hierarchy and often "flow down" the organizational hierarchy (Itzkovich, 2015), these definitions manage to portray a large portion of offensive interpersonal behaviors. Despite the prominence of power gaps underlying these behaviors, these definitions are considered to be deviant behaviors, thus peripheral and detached from the mainstream of organizational behavior and specifically, leadership theory.

In parallel, several other theoretical concepts have been put forward to account for a variety of offensive interpersonal behaviors that do not necessarily involve a power gap between perpetrators and victims. These behaviors comprise the second main category of definitions, all of which are focused on the boundaries and/or content of adverse interpersonal behaviors. (Itzkovich, 2015; Itzkovich et al., 2020). These definitions include *harassment*, a term coined by Einarsen and Raknes (1997), *emotional abuse*, (Keashly, 2001), *workplace incivility*, (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Schilpzand et al., 2016) and others. Although the two categories of definitions are distinct, the boundaries among the different terms are similar, as can be learned by examining the essence of incivility.

**The case of incivility**

Incivility is defined as rude, inconsiderate behavior that damage the victim's willingness to utilize his or her positive potential within the organizational framework (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Schilpzand et al., 2016; Itzkovich et al., 2020). It is distinctive from other mistreatments due to two main theoretical features. Firstly, the intention underlying an uncivil act is defined as ambiguous, while specific types, such as bullying, are defined as intentional (Itzkovich, 2010, 2020). Secondly, incivility is defined as low intensity compared to other acts of mistreatment, such as bullying (Itzkovich, 2015).

Empirically, these distinctive characteristics can be questioned. Firstly, all existing measures of incivility do not account for intention, since the perpetrator’s intentions are difficult to operationalize (Itzkovich et al., 2020). Additionally, the low-intensity part of the definition is not operationalized, and the measures of incivility also account for high-intensity behavioral features, such as intimidation and humiliation, which are also considered indicators of more intensified misbehaviors, such as bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009).

**Are these pillars distinctive or can we integrate concepts?**

The main feature that distinguishes the two main types of definitions (pillars) is that the first pillar focuses on the identity of the perpetrator while the second focuses on the boundaries of the behavior. The most often used measurements of incivility are indifferent to the identity of the perpetrator. A seven-item scale or its upgraded version of 12 items, asks participants to indicate the frequency with which they encounter uncivil behavior from supervisors or coworkers (Cortina et al., 2001; Cortina et al., 2013).

Although there is theoretical legitimacy for different sources of perpetration, this is not the case empirically. In a serious of seven samples collected in Israel across populations and in subsequent periods, the authors attempt to account for the identity of the perpetrator.

Although the original tools are indifferent to the identity of the perpetrator, another question was added to account for it. Following the incivility indicators, respondents were also asked who was the primary source of the behaviors associated with their mistreatment experience. The options included the following: Your direct manager/supervisor; Colleagues in a similar position to yours. (Peers); Coworker on a level lower than you in the corporate hierarchy; Coworkers on a level higher than you in the corporate hierarchy but not direct supervisors; Customers or visitors (Itzkovich, 2010).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table one clearly shows that the primary perpetrators of incivility are in positions of power compared to their victims. Thus, more than anything else, incivility can be considered part of a leadership style just like the other forms of mistreatment. The constructs of the first pillar are designed to measure mistreatment from power holders. In the case of incivility, incorporated by the second pillar, the distribution of perpetration could have been random. Yet, even when it was not controlled, the findings from the seven different samples show a clear foundation of power underlying incivility.

These findings correspond with Aquino and Thau's (2009) call to integrate all existing definitions of offensive interpersonal behaviors under a single term, 'victimization' which is focused on victims' perceptions and not the perpetrator's characteristics or any specific distinct quality of behavioral expressions.

Despite its well-grounded rational, the call for a unified conceptualization focused solely on the victim's perception cannot capture the essence of mistreatment comprehensively. Firstly, it doesn't account for the prevalence of power gaps between the two parties to the adverse interaction (Itzkovich et al., 2018) which is prominent in a large portion of these behaviors. Secondly, it doesn't account for the differences in the impact these power gaps can generate compared to mistreatment between equals or to bottom-up mistreatment (Itzkovich, 2014). More importantly, although a unified concept could clear up and overcome theoretical overlaps, the issue at hand is much broader than the boundaries of the abovementioned discussion. From a broader perspective, it is not only a question of the unity of terminology but a question of its centricity and framework. Calling for a discussion on the similarities and differences among the constructs might leave some terms in a preferential position and lead to being investigated under a framework of deviant behavior (Robinsson and Bennet,1995). On the other hand, accounting for the centricity of power gaps embedded in such interactions can shift the discussion to a more centralized theme, namely leadership behaviors. Such a conceptual change would strengthen the legitimacy and willingness to deal with these behaviors and promote more accurate mitigation.

Overall, discussing workplace mistreatment in the framework of leadership is scantily addressed (Hoel et al., 2011; Lee and Jensen, 2014). Most of the effort has been focused on leadership in general. In contrast, other scholars have focused on specific leadership models, such as the full range of leadership and the relationship between leadership facets and types of mistreatment (Lee and Jensen, 2014). All in all, these discussions have overlooked the possibility that mistreatment not only relates to some facets of leadership but can also be considered an expression of leadership in itself. To address this gap, Einarsen et al. (2007) and Itzkovich et al. (2020) have in recent years suggested theoretical models that account for leader misbehaviors. As an example in the Itzkovich et al. (2020) Complete Full Range of Leadership (CFRL) model, the active-destructive leadership (ADL) facet integrates purposely adverse leader behaviors that are active yet very destructive to both followers and organizations alike. The model put forth the idea that leaders can misbehave in active as well as passive manners, implying that when we accept models of leadership, we should recognize the destructive potential of leadership, namely dark side of leadership.

**Why now more than ever before when pressure and opportunity meet?**

Understanding these darker facets of leadership which are costly to both individuals and organizations is more essential now than ever before. After years of stability and security that have characterized the foundations of employment, employees and employers are facing new arrangements of work in which secure employment is less attainable. Employees encounter poor quality and relatively insecure jobs across sectors (Fiorito et al., 2019). Precarious work arrangements have become enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which confronts employees with increased financial pressure, isolation from their social environment, fear of illness, and fear of potential unemployment (Shaw et al., 2020).

Studies indicate that these stressors and others, which reflect an imbalance between job demands and available resources to deal with these demands (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), constitute emotional and behavioral responses that might be counterproductive (Roberts et al. 2011). Indeed, Oyeleye et al. (2013) found that stress is related to job conflict. In the same vein, Roberts et al. (2011) managed to show that stress leads to the perpetration of incivility.

As managers control the distribution of incentives and rewards that allow them to influence followers (Michel *et al.,* 2011), it is likely that in stressful times, the opportunity their power position enables can be directed to mistreat followers for two reasons: The first is that followers are less likely to retaliate, as retaliation will increase the risk of losing more resources (Itzkovich, 2014). The second reason in that leaders want to alleviate the negative emotions that can arise from stressors in such troublesome times, and demonstration of mistreatment is a possible reaction for that purpose (Roberts et al., 2011).

Framing mistreatment as a leadership facet is significant and considering its consequences, mistreatment should be noted and as much as possible mitigated. Yet it seems that according to the reported interventions of mistreatments, this notion becomes much more critical. Thus far, only a negligible amount of research has measured the effect of active interventions of different mistreatments (Howard and Embree, 2020). Most has overlooked the organizational level (Hodgins et al., 2014), although it has been noted as crucial for a successful intervention process (Hodgins et al., 2014; Olsen et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2020). In a seminal review of mistreatment interventions, Hodgins et al. (2014) showed that not only the organizational level has been overlooked when trying to mitigate mistreatment but also the power holders; leaders are absent from most intervention plans. As mistreatment is mainly manifested through leaders as shown, it is expected that mitigation efforts would address power holders in particular. Still, it has not been the case in any of the interventions reported. Thus, it is not surprising to find that researchers have reported the effectiveness of most of the interventions as weak. To increase the effectiveness, interventions must focus on leaders that are inclined to mistreat their followers during stressful times. For that to happen, the first stage is to perceive mistreatment as a leadership style rather than a deviant, peripheral phenomenon. Leaders have the ability to choose how they lead. Understanding that their options can be adverse is a first step in mitigating the darker facets of leadership. Especially in times of increasing challenges and multiple stressors, such a change in perception is not only desirable but truly imperative.

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