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# Social Undermining, Stress and Well-Being: A Mediation Mechanism

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Abstract: The study aims to explore the effects of social undermining of employee/s, thus augmenting the stress level and negatively affecting the well-being of employees working in the Banking Sector of Pakistan. Data were drawn from a sample size of 376 respondents selected based on a stratified sampling technique. The results proved that social undermining increased stress and caused to reduction in the well-being of employees, which was in line with the affective event theory. The study helped provide a guideline for researchers working on the role of various mistreatments, including social undermining, and better comprehend the mediating nature of stress among said relationships. It also paved the way for new researchers and practitioners in working on the multifaceted nature of mistreatments among employees.

Key Words: Mistreatment, Social undermining, Stress, Employee well being

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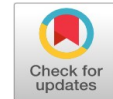
INTRODUCTION

Social undermining (henceforth SU, a form of mistreatment) is a common problem faced by employees at workplace. SU is expression of negative and unfavorable emotions towards a specific person with an aim to prevent that individual to achieve her/his goals. SU is usually shown in terms of certain feelings, dislike or anger (Joseph et al., 2011). This phenomenon has received increased scholars' attention and the ways to overcome it, in recent past (Abas & Otto, 2016).

Research has proved negative consequences mistreatment brings at the workplace like, reduced job performance, low job satisfaction, low commitment and increased stress (Bergman et al., 2002; Fox & Stallworth, 2010; Salin & Hoel, 2013). It is also found that employees who feel mistreated at work usually remain silent and try to ignore, negate and lessen such experiences (Cortina, et al., 2002). According to Cortina and Magley (2003) consequently such individual usually remain in stress. On the other hand, individuals who raise voice against mistreatments, usually face retaliation and resistance from other fellows, which results in lower work outcomes (Klaas & DeNisi, 1989; Lewin, 1987). Therefore, both speaking up and avoiding categories of mistreatment are linked with high risk and costs.

It is evident that individuals facing mistreatment experience face stress at workplace such as negative emotions caused by incivility, bullying and abusive supervision (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Lim, Cortina & Magley, 2008). While looking in context of workplace mistreatment, occupational stress framework is used to explain the antecedents and consequences relation related to work stress. This framework has three core concepts, covering: stressor, stress and strain. Stressors cover the environmental events happening at workplace. Stress is subjective believed to be subjective experience of a person, while strain is believed to be the psychological or physiological response attributed to the stressors. Out of various organizational level stressors, social undermining (a common mistreatment at work) is considered an important stressor. It is usually evaluated by the recipient and is appraised as stressing factor. It is expected to lead to high level of stress, which results in terms of strain. It could thus be inferred that mistreatment influence both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of victims. Previous researches highlight that victims of harassment and mistreatment tend to report reduced positive attitudes e.g. work effort (Burnes & Pope, 2007); job satisfaction (Penney & Spector, 2005); lower commitment (Sakurai, Jex & Gillepie, 2011), and increased negative elements e.g. stress (Barclay, Skarlicki & Pugh, 2005). Most of

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the past studies have taken physical elements of mistreatment (e.g. physical violence), but the role of emotional victimization (e.g. social undermining) has largely been ignored (Tepper, 2000; Schat, Kelloway & Desmarais, 2005; Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2008).

Past studies have valued that mistreatment has tendency to cause stress among victims, which ultimately influence employees' response in terms of undesired work attitude, behavior and outcomes (Karatepe, Yorganci & Haktanir, 2009). It is therefore, desired to have a focused approach towards understanding, investigation and reduction of mistreatment and its effects at workplace (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Nor Intan Shamimi & Ahmad, 2015). Stress is found to have damaging effects on employees' psychological outcomes, including well-being, but the literature providing evidence for such relation is scarce and limited. Well-being is a state of being characterized with not only good health or wellness, but also by comfort, personal prosperity and home life (Seligman, 2011). It is thus valued and cherished as the important consideration but has no received due attention. This study attempts to investigate the aforementioned phenomenon with an evidence from Pakistani environment, as such mistreatments are often not reported in this part of the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social undermining

Social undermining is defined as expression of negative and unfavorable emotions towards a specific person with an aim to prevent that individual to achieve her/his goals. SU is usually expressed in shape of certain negative feelings, dislike or anger (Joseph et al., 2011), but the outcomes associated with such feelings come up with various negative outcomes. For example, undermining behaviors is assumed to gradually reduce the positive outcomes of target, ultimately leading to negative consequences to follow (Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper & Aquino, 2012). Undermining is backed by the intentions of the aggressor, and an unintentional behavior is not believed to be undermining. If a victim believes that colleagues is not providing required information or not performing desired task due to some family issues. This situation will not be considered as undermining. Similarly, a comment made by a colleague that could be attributed to the stressful event of divorce, the said comment will be considered as the stress rather than case of undermining. Thus behaviors where intentions are not involved fall outside the scope of undermining (Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002). Such intentional attitudes (social undermining) is noticed to have both attitudinal and behavior consequences, in response (Duffy et al., 2002; Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson & Pagon 2006).

Stress

Stress is considered as a transaction between individual and transaction, where individual receives something negative as an environmental factor (Lazarus, 1990; Tennant, 2001), and is considered as the psychological response towards environmental input (Cooper, Dewe & O'Driscoll, 2001). If individual is not capable to handle the situation caused by the environment, the psychological outcome appears in shape of stress. Current study uses, occupational stress framework is the explanatory mechanism of the workplace stress. It covers stressors, strain and stress (Pearson & Porath, 2009).

Well-being

Well-being is state when an individual is considered at good health and wellness along with satisfaction and comfort at professional and personal life. a state of being an individual that is characterized not only by good health or wellness (Seligman, 2011). It is also considered as the employee overall familiarity and functioning of work as a whole. It offers an environment that encourages a state with positive feelings e.g. satisfaction, and encourages and allows employees to utilize their full potentials for their sake and sake of organization (Grant, Christianson & Price, 2007).

Hypotheses development

Affective Event Theory of Weiss and Cropanzano, (1996) suggests that individuals are emotionally

reactive at workplace events. A positive event at workplace may bring positive emotions (Nielsen, Jex & Adams, 2000; Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009), while negative events like facing abusive supervisors lead towards the negative emotions among individuals (Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter & Kacmar, 2007). Interpersonal mistreatments being a negative event is found to bring adverse emotional responses of individuals (Feshbach, 1990; Pearson, Andersson & Wegner, 2001). Being mistreated, an individual responds in shape of hostility and isolation which damages and demoralizes one's sense of belonging with the organization (Hornstein, 2003; Pearson et al., 2001; Hutchinson, Vickers & Jackson, 2006). Past studies have also reported that victims of social undermining experience increased levels of stress and ultimately lower job satisfaction and well-being (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Nahum-Shani, Henderson, Lim & Vinokur, 2014). This relation can also be explained by the Stress Process Theory (SPT), which assumes that those who face mistreatment respond by showing high level of psychological outcomes in terms of distress and negative emotions. Hence, both past studies and theories propose that mistreatment should be associated with emotions in terms of stress and job attitudes and behaviors.

It is also evident that mistreatment has a negative impact on employees' mental and emotional well-being. It is reported that mistreatment decreases psychological well-being of victims, and resultantly causes reduction in job satisfaction and commitment (Luo & Waite, 2011). Allen, Hubbard and Sullivan (2005) also found that due to mistreatment at workplace individuals have to face high level of stress. Bowling and Beehr (2006) conducted a meta-analysis and evaluated that interpersonal mistreatments is related to number of undesirable work outcomes and reactions including anxiety, job dissatisfaction, depression and decreased self-esteem (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). It is thus inferred that interpersonal mistreatments is an important antecedent of various negative emotional responses (Feshbach, 1986). It is thus concluded that both theory and past studies support the notion that mistreatment should relate negatively to individual's emotion (Gallus, Bunk, Matthews, Barnes-Farrell & Magley, 2014), and same can be assumed for social well-being and stress. Considering the mistreatment as a stressor and social undermining as a form of mistreatment, following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Social undermining increases stress among employees
H2: Social undermining reduces well-being of employees

Stress present at work is also found to have detrimental effects on well-being. Past studies concluded that stress elements have both attitudinal and behavioral consequences (Harrison & Rainer, 1996). Past studies have reported that stress works as cause of lower job performance, satisfaction and involvement (Jackson & Schuler, 1985); while from individual perspective it is main source of reduced well-being. Outcomes of workplace mistreatment and stress may make workplace discourteous, unfavorable, restricted, distrustful and stressful. It would ultimately effect employees in shape of increased absenteeism, reduced productivity, demolished commitment, and reduced satisfaction with job (Pearson et al., 2001), and same can be assumed for well-being. Thus following hypothesis is constructed:

H3: Stress negatively influences employees' well-being
H4: Stress works as partial mediator in the relationship of social undermining and well-being

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
This study is conducted on the sample of banking employees. The sample is selected as these employees work whole day, face excessive work burden and has to face customers on regular basis. Data was drawn from 376 respondents selected on the basis of stratified sampling technique. Data was collected from four main cities of Punjab (i.e. Multan, Sahiwal, Bahawalpur and Khanewal). Researcher personally visited banks and after having meetings with the managers, distributed and got questionnaire filled from employees. Questionnaire of the study was adapted from previous studies. Social undermining was operationalized with Duffy et al. (2002) measure, having exemplary items like "Put you down when you questioned work procedures", "Talked bad about you behind your back", "Insulted you", "Spread rumors about you", "Made you feel incompetent". Stress was measured through the 30 items questionnaire of Levenstein et al. (1993). Some of the sample items are, "you feel rested", "and you feel that too many demands are being made on you", "you are irritable or grouchy and you have too many things to do". Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale is adapted to measure well-being (Tennant et al., 2007).

Some of the sample items are, "I have been feeling optimistic about the future", "I have been feeling useful", "I have been feeling relaxed", "I have been feeling interested in other people".

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 covers the complete details of descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation analysis. All the measures were operationalized at five point scales (1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree), thus the mean score is at that scale. All the mean score are close to 4, except well-being, thus showing that respondents showed satisfaction with the measures. It could also be inferred that employees had social undermining, stress and well-being problems at work. Furthermore, it is also evident that all the variables are correlated at 1% level of significance.

Table 1: Descriptive statistic and correlation analysis

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
SU (1)	3.92	0.334			
Stress (2)	3.86	0.256	0.31*		
WB (3)	3.06	0.318	-0.45*	-0.29*	

*$p<.01$

Confirmatory factor analysis was also done in analysis process. Confirmation factor analysis was done for one mode, two models, and three models. The reason was to judge the fitness indices in independence and dependence of variables. The one factor model showed best parsimonious fit when compared with other models. Furthermore, all the items showed acceptable loading values (>0.50) (Karatepe & Sokmen, 2006). Furthermore, it was also observed that the scales had discriminant validity (AVE was greater than the squared correlation coefficient of the variables).

Causal relation among variables was judged through path analysis through structural equation modelling technique. Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson and Tathum, (2006) guidelines for fitness indices were adapted as standard guidelines. The hypothesized model was found acceptably fit, where most of the fitness indices met the standards (χ^2/df=2.35, GFI=0.910, AGFI=0.801, CFI=0.874, NFI=0.81, NNFI=0.907). Results of path analysis are shown in table 2.

Table 2: Path analysis

Hypotheses	Path	Regression Weights	C.R.	p	Results
H1	SU-S	0.309	2.054	**	Supported
H2	SU-WB	0.298	2.386	*	Supported
H3	S-WB	0.214	2.172	*	Supported

*$p<0.01$, **$p<.05$

Results of mediation analysis are shown in table 3, which covers direct effects, indirect effects and total effects. It is evident from the table that indirect effect is less than the direct effect, but is significant. Thus it supports our H4, where it was assumed that stress works as partial mediator.

Table 3: Path analysis

	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
SU	0.298	.066	0.364
Stress	0.214		

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to investigate the mechanism between social udermining, stress and well-being four hypotheses were tested. Partial mediation results, prove that social undermining increased stress and reduces well-being, while stress can bridge the relation. These findings are in line with Affective Event Theory, which assumes that events at workplace have direct bearing on employees employees psychological responses. Furthermore, negative events create negative responses and vice versa. Social undermining

being negative event, is believed to influence the stress level which reduces well-being of the employees.

These findings helped us infer that at workplace social undermining is one of the existing issues and needs attention from top level management. When organizations can remove the mistreatments at workplace (social undermining) the feelings of employees will get changed as it will become positive workplace event, which will reduce stress and ultimately increase workplace well-being. Thus stress was noticed as the suppressor of the association between mistreatment and well-being. So, there is no mediated effect of bullying in the existence of stress as a mediator.

This study adds value in existing literature by adding valuable comments in existing body of knowledge. This study offers a unique research model which is helpful in explaining the mechanism between mistreatment and attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. As it explains that mechanism the findings of the article can be improved by improving its methodological, analytical and theoretical contains. For instance, its methodological constraints like possible common method variance, language barriers in questionnaire filling and distribution. Such problems can be overcome by having longitudinal design and improvements in methodological stances. Similarly all other issues should also be dealt with.

This study is also useful for managers, as they have to face and cope up the situation of stress at workplace along with improving the well-being perceptions. It is thus valued that in order to improve their personal, social and personal level life factors (well-being), which can be ensured by proper utilization and control of negative incidents. For instance, in the study, a form of mistreatment (i.e. social undermining) has been utilized to test a model of mistreatment as a social event. The findings proved that assumed relation, thus can help manager infer that if such mistreatment is present at workplaces, employees will be in stress and will have low well-being. These findings highlight the need of implementation of a stress reduction policy that enables and supports employees to deal with such negative psychological state. Furthermore, these findings also show the way to improve the well-being of employees.

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