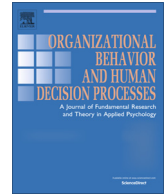




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## Preface

## Unfairness begets unfairness: Victim derogation bias in employee ratings



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## ABSTRACT

This research investigated criterion contamination in human resource evaluations, specifically victim derogation in which third parties (e.g., managers, co-workers) systematically undervalue the performance and potential of individuals who have previously suffered organizational injustices. A policy capturing design (Study 1) found that managers rated job applicants who had been treated unfairly by their previous employers as less suitable than fairly treated applicants, after objective performance information was controlled. In Study 2, the effect of unfair treatment on job applicant ratings was found to be moderated by managers' just world beliefs, with applicant ratings reflecting more derogation among managers with higher (vs. lower) Belief in a Just World. In Study 3, the pattern of results from Study 2 was replicated in a performance evaluation context using peers as raters. Moreover, in Study 3 an intervention that activated raters' moral identity was found to attenuate victim derogation bias.

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## Introduction

A burgeoning literature demonstrates that organizational injustice can have a profound impact on mistreated employees in terms of their attitudes and behaviors. Unjust acts can also affect third parties—individuals who gain knowledge of the injustice—who can be motivated to remedy the situation by punishing wrongdoers or aiding victims (e.g., O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Little research, however, has considered that knowledge of injustice might also result in third parties imposing additional harm on the victim.

In the current research, we argue that knowledge of organizational injustice can elicit a negative bias by third parties toward the victim in human resource decisions. In building this argument, we draw upon and extend the criterion contamination literature (e.g., Heneman, 1986), which highlights the capacity for objectively irrelevant information to influence decision-making. We also incorporate personality and social psychology research, arguing that a psychological process linking organizational injustice to criterion contamination in human resource decisions involves *victim derogation*. Specifically, third parties can blame the victim in order to maintain a *belief in a just world* (BJW), or mindset in which the

world is fundamentally fair and just (e.g., De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Furnham, 2003; Lerner & Miller, 1978).

Additionally, we argue that because to blame victims without evidence of deservedness is decidedly uncharitable, an intervention heightening moral identity, or the salience of one's moral self (Aquino & Reed, 2002), should reduce the negative bias arising from knowledge of prior negative outcomes befalling the victim (cf., Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Lapsley & Lasky, 2001). This portion of our argument integrates and extends moral identity theory and just world belief theory. In doing this, we also test a mechanism that has been argued to link moral identity with action toward others (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Reed & Aquino, 2003), namely, one's circle of moral regard. Ultimately, this research endeavors to highlight the potential for organizational injustice to reverberate harm to victims by eliciting a subsequent bias toward them. We aim to understand the psychological processes underlying this bias and consider how this bias can be reduced.

## Background

Criterion contamination occurs when variance unrelated to the construct a criterion seeks to assess is included in its measure, thus decreasing the quality of information captured in a measurement value (Heneman, 1986). Criterion contamination can be divided into two distinct parts: error and bias (Brogden & Taylor, 1950).

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Whereas the influence of error on the criterion is random by definition, bias systematically introduces exogenous variance. Importantly, because biases have underlying causes, they sometimes can be reduced or eliminated through training or other interventions (Murphy & de Shon, 2000).

Numerous forms of bias have been shown to influence human resource ratings. Anchoring bias, for example, occurs when some initial, perhaps arbitrary, valuation of a specific criterion unduly influences subsequent valuations of that criterion (Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1971; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Halo (horn) bias occurs when one's assessment of another's individual characteristic is conflated with positive (negative) overall impression of that person (Thorndike, 1920). In inter-group bias, judgment of another person is buoyed by shared group membership or deflated by lack of it (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Sex-bias involves perceived fit between ratee gender and stereotypic gender of a given role influencing ratings (Dipboye, 1985).

Social psychology theory and research, however, has identified another source of bias, victim derogation, that has potentially important implications for human resource decision making but has thus far received limited scrutiny in organizational research (cf., Kray & Lind, 2002; Skarlicki, Ellard, & Kelln, 1998). Similar to sex bias, victim derogation involves the ratee being viewed through a lens blurred by the rater's worldview. It is distinct from sex bias and other biases, however, in that the contaminating effects are not triggered by initial or general impressions, the ratees' traits, attributes, actions, or even group memberships but, rather, by things that have happened to them.

Victim derogation involves unwarranted judgments that those who have suffered (must have) deserved their plight, even if there is little or no evidence to that effect (Hafer & Begue, 2005; Lerner, 1965). The motivation to derogate victims has been argued to arise from the pervasive need among humans to view the world as fundamentally fair and ordered rather than chaotic and haphazard. Specifically, observing mistreatment or other negative outcomes befalling others when there is no evidence of deservingness can challenge just worldviews—*if people receive negative outcomes without deserving them, how just can the world be?* On the one hand is the observer's belief that the world is just, a view with which people are generally unwilling to part; on the other hand is the apparent reality that someone has received undeserved mistreatment. To alleviate cognitive dissonance, just world believers must reconcile the two (Lerner, 1980) and thus can conclude that mistreatment was somehow deserved after all.

Attribution theory similarly proposes that people make attributions for the outcomes they and others receive in order to feel that they maintain, predict, and control their environments (Wong & Weiner, 1981). These processes are likely to result in victim blaming when the observer can target certain victim characteristics or actions that can be related causally and logically to the observed negative outcome (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). In this way, people can arrive at unfounded conclusions that, for example, those living with HIV/AIDS must have been too sexually promiscuous or auto accident victims were probably drinking alcohol and almost certainly were not wearing seatbelts (e.g., Connors & Heaven, 1990; De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; see Furnham, 2003).

Building on this research, in organizational contexts third parties (e.g., managers and coworkers) should deem that unfairly treated individuals brought on their mistreatment through poor performance and/or other actions or attributes logically related to the workplace. Consistent with that attribution, when providing employee ratings, third parties are likely to derogate victims, providing them lower ratings than those given to fairly treated but otherwise identical individuals. To the extent this occurs, it comprises third party raters allowing endogenous information about mistreatment that a person had suffered from an organization or

its representative to influence their assessments of the victim's objective merit or worth.

If victim derogation bias in human resource decisions is to be tested, however, it is critical to establish that any lower ratings in such a situation are due to the unfair treatment and not to something else. Thus, in the present research we use a variety of experimental designs to ensure that the comparison "identical employee" truly does not differ in any other meaningful way. In Study 1, we employ a policy-capturing methodology to determine if unfair treatment suffered in organizational contexts triggers victim derogation bias. In Study 2, we test whether victim derogation bias occurs as a function of raters' Belief in a Just World. In Study 3, we explore whether victim derogation can be mitigated via a moral identity priming intervention. Across all three studies, we operationalize organizational justice violations in terms of distributive (unfavorable outcomes: Adams, 1965), procedural (violations of accepted procedures in deriving one's outcomes: Leventhal, 1976), and informational (failing to provide employees with explanation and rationale for a decision: Greenberg, 1993) justice. To minimize potential confounds, we do not focus on a fourth dimension that authors have identified, namely, interpersonal justice (see, Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005). Interpersonal justice comprises treatment reflecting dignity and respect and can be eroded when other justice dimensions are violated (Bies, 2005; Tyler & Bies, 1990).

## Study 1

Building on the theory and research discussed above, we reasoned that when individuals experience injustice within the workplace, third parties can conclude that those individuals somehow "got what they deserved," even when no evidence to support such a conclusion is present. We expected that in order to facilitate those conclusions, managers would derogate mistreated employees on traits logically associated with workplace outcomes: *Individuals experiencing what must otherwise be seen as an organizational injustice must have demonstrated traits or behaviors inconsistent with those desired from good employees.*

The context for Study 1 was one in which managers rated job applicants who had been laid off by a previous employer. We chose this context because layoffs continue to be commonplace in many organizations (Pfeffer, 2010), and they vary in terms of fairness to those affected (Brockner, 1990). We predicted that injustices experienced by a job candidate during a layoff by a previous employer would elicit victim derogation in human resource evaluations made by managers. Specifically, when considering a job applicant's desirability, managers would rate those who had experienced injustice in the layoff as less desirable than otherwise identical candidates who had not experienced injustice in the layoff.

**Hypothesis 1.** Information about job candidates experiencing (1a) distributive, (1b) procedural, or (1c) informational injustice results in lower desirability ratings, such that after controlling for objective performance, candidates having been treated unjustly are rated less favorably than candidates having been treated justly.

Although a single apparently unjust outcome befalling another is likely to elicit cognitive dissonance sufficient to motivate victim derogation, we also reasoned that victim derogation would be more strongly exhibited when candidates experience unfavorable outcomes on multiple organizational justice dimensions. This is because additional unjust outcomes befalling a person should serve as stronger evidence that the world is *systematically* unfair, unless an explanation for those negative outcomes can be found. Third parties were expected to view unfairness befalling one

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