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An instrumental and relational explanation of witness reactions to interactional injustice in the workplace: The case of inter-peer derogation

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Abstract. Research on organizational injustice has recently begun to endeavor to understand the conditions in which a witness who is not directly affected by such a situation can be encouraged to react. This article contributes to this emerging and mainly theoretical literature by empirically testing the influence of three witness characteristics: one instrumental (just world belief), one moral (cynical hostility) and one relational (personal experience of injustice). Using a synthesis of the three theoretical explanations currently available and an experiment involving 223 employees and how they attribute responsibility for an act of denigration in the workplace, we reveal the intra-psychic and inter-group conditions in which the predisposition of the witness to offer help to the person responsible for the act, if needed, is weak. The findings alert managers to the dangers for the smooth running of the organization of allowing a climate of denigration to develop. They also develop current theoretical knowledge of witnesses' attitudinal reactions to interactional injustice in the workplace.

Keywords: cynical hostility, interactional injustice, interpersonal helping, just world belief, third party

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal helping behaviors, i.e. the different forms of assistance voluntarily offered to other members of the organization in order to enable them to cope with the difficulties they face (Organ, Podsakoff & MacKensie, 2006), are part of a vast set of extra-role behaviors (Dalal, 2005). The interest shown by management science researchers in these attitudes, actions and gestures that benefit the organization but cannot be imposed by formal role obligations or by contractual guarantees of reward (Organ, 1990: 46), can most likely be explained by their close link to performance in the workplace (Hoffman, Blair, Meriac & Woehr, 2007). They are a tangible expression of the "affective atmosphere" in the workplace (Gherardi, 2017). The correlates most often cited (LePine, Erez & Johnson, 2002) are personal, managerial and situational characteristics like perceptions of organizational justice. Here, organizational justice is defined as a social construct, i.e. a perception of the honesty of decisions and how they should be (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter & Ng, 2001:

425). Its relationship with interpersonal helping is usually explained in reference to processes of identification with the organization in general or one of its members in particular (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). Such identification is made possible by the coherence which this justice lends the environment and by reducing the level of uncertainty it creates, particularly at the time of organizational socialization (Akremi, Ikram Nasr & Richebé, 2014). When a perception of justice is lacking, the negative consequences have essentially been measured in academic studies in terms of the victim of ill treatment at the hands of the organization or one of its representatives (e.g. Aquino & Thau, 2009).

However relevant and instructive they may be, such conclusions overlook witness reactions to acts of injustice suffered by others (Dunford, Jackson, Boss, Tay & Boss, 2015), especially when the perpetrator is the victim's coworker and hierarchical peer. The most recent studies have begun to try to understand why an employee not directly concerned by an act of injustice—referred to as a third party—might encourage such behavior, remain indifferent by turning a blind eye or, on the contrary, decide to react by denouncing or combating it (Linstead, 2013). In terms of relationships between colleagues, this is more than an anecdotal issue for managers: it raises questions about the way a negative spiral of unethical behavioral exchanges can be triggered in an organization and ultimately have serious and negative consequences on how it operates.

The aim of this research is to contribute to this emerging academic debate by identifying the conditions in which a witness may decide to be more than a mere "organizational bystander" (Linstead, 2013). Specifically, we test the influence of three personal witness characteristics on the relationship between his image of the perpetrator of an act of denigration and his predisposition to offer that person help in a professional context. The independent variable manipulated in this test is the witness's perception of the perpetrator. This is the result of the attribution of responsibility for the act of denigration. When the victim is not at fault professionally, the criticism is unjust as it is unfounded and gratuitous. The image of the perpetrator is therefore negative as he is responsible for the injustice. The independent variables invoked (i.e. the witness's personal characteristics whose moderator effect is tested) are instrumental. They are: the witness's belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980); moral—his level of cynical hostility (Cook & Medley, 1954); and relational—his personal experience of injustice (Lind, Kray & Thompson, 1998). The first relates to the extent to which the person adheres to the principle that people "get what they deserve and deserve what they get" (Lerner, 1980). Cynical hostility is a personality trait characterized by an attitude of mistrust when it comes to interpersonal relationships. It is reflected in a general tendency to adopt behaviors or make comments that are aggressive, suspicious or angry towards others. The dependent variable in the model tested is the witness's predisposition towards helping behavior in favor of the person responsible for the act of denigration.

The results obtained from an experiment in which 223 participants (all company employees) were placed in the position of a witness to an act of derogation reveal that the moderator effect of their just world belief and their personal experience of injustice depend on their causal attribution, i.e. on the perceived injustice. In contrast, their level of cynical hostility has no significant moderator effect regardless of who is held responsible for the act of denigration. To reach these conclusions, first of all we provide an original synthesis of the three theoretical models currently available: the witness's self-interest (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005), the moral or "deontic" imperative (Folger, 2001) and the relational response (Dunford, et al.,

2015). In summary, this experiment helps identify the conditions in which a dyadic relationship between the perpetrator and witness of an act of derogation in the workplace is likely to deteriorate. It provides an original response to the call by Ellard and Skarlicki (2002) for greater clarity on the motivational, cognitive and social processes underpinning witness reactions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: THE PROCESS UNDERPINNING WITNESS REACTIONS TO INJUSTICE

While the effect of the victim's personal characteristics on how he reacts to injustice has been widely studied, the impact of those of the witness appears to remain largely unknown. To explain a reaction or lack thereof, three theoretical explanatory models with different levels of analysis have so far been proposed. The self-interest model can be situated at the intra-psychic level. It is based on an instrumental motivation that causes witnesses to react because they feel a need to re-establish justice in the attribution of rewards and thereby control their own fate. The moral imperative model can be situated at the interpersonal level. It explains reactions in reference to the witness's moral identity (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011), i.e. the more or less central role played by the network of associations between moral traits (for example, displaying compassion, honesty, generosity, etc.) in the way that person broadly self-defines (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Among employees with this personality trait, a deontic—altruistic—reaction to injustice is recorded simply because it is the "right thing to do" (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel & Rupp, 2001). Inspired by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the relational response model reveals that by trying to re-establish justice within the organization, witnesses preserve their chances of identifying with it and satisfying their need for a sense of belonging. This reasoning takes place at the intra- and inter-group levels. The self-interest and moral imperative models are probably the most developed in theoretical terms; between them they explain the reaction of direct witnesses in reference to a psychological process that includes a phase in which the level of injustice suffered by the victim is estimated, followed by the attribution of responsibility for the event, and finally identification with the victim. This script seems to have sufficient scope to allow a relational explanation to be included.

ESTIMATING THE LEVEL OF INJUSTICE

Organizational justice has traditionally been presented as a multidimensional construct (for a comprehensive definition, see Colquitt, et al., 2001). The interactional dimension depends on the nature of social relations, notably in terms of politeness, respect, dignity and integrity (Bies, 2002). It has usually been studied via manager–employee interactions (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). However, its source can be broader than this (the organization itself) or more local (work colleagues) (Dunford, et al., 2015). It not only relates to the exchanges that take place but all interpersonal dealings experienced on a daily basis. In this respect, workplace derogation can constitute a particular form of interactional injustice (Bies, 2002). This social phenomenon includes informal remarks publicly criticizing another company employee who is absent but clearly targeted. Here, three parties are involved: the source of the remarks, the victim and the witness, who in this case is the third party listening to the remarks.

Because it is intentional and difficult to formally sanction (Noon & Delbridge, 1993), derogation is a particularly worrying act. It can lead to mental distress, discomfort or malaise in both the victim and witness insofar as there is no longer necessarily a clear association between bad actions and punishment (Zhu, Martens & Aquino, 2012). The integrity of the system of personal beliefs is undermined to such an extent as to constitute an existential threat. Talking ill of another employee behind their back is therefore morally condemned. Listening to such remarks can even generate feelings of shameful guilt (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Perceptions of the level of injustice inherent in such actions seem to be independent of the witness's age, gender, ethnicity, education or seniority (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). According to the fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001), the damage is instead evaluated by comparing the situation to alternative imaginary events: *would* the victim have felt better if the event had been different, in this case if there had been no derogation? However the witness responds to this question, a reaction on his part does not necessarily follow (Greenberg, 2001). A reaction requires attributing responsibility to the perpetrator and identifying with the victim, if we follow the logic of the self-interest and moral imperative models.

ATTRIBUTING RESPONSIBILITY

Generally speaking, the attribution of responsibility for an action in a complex situation is based on causal inferences (Heider, 1958). The witness uses these in an effort to determine whether the perpetrator's intention, the victim's behavior or some other external factor is to blame. Causal inferences are influenced by a norm of internality that places less importance on the impact of the context and circumstances than on the behavior of the people involved (Dubois, 2009). Subject to this judgment bias, witnesses tend to ask two additional questions according to the fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001): *could* the perpetrator have acted differently (attribution of responsibility)? *Should* he have acted differently (belief in moral responsibility)? One's perception of the injustice suffered by the victim—in this case the perpetrator's responsibility for derogating a colleague in the workplace—could be perturbed by the power imbalance between the two parties. In an act of derogation, the witness is effectively being implicitly invited to share the negative opinion expressed and to believe that the victim deserves this ill treatment. It is a social action that displays a dimension of latent coercion: by making it clear that he could equally spread similar information about the witness, the perpetrator is issuing a veiled threat (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). In other words, potential harm to the witness is added to the very real harm being caused to the victim. This threat is all the more credible in the case of a power imbalance. When the perpetrator's centrality within the social network is manifest and well known, his capacity to influence the other employees is noticed (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). The cost–benefit ratio established by the witness therefore tells him either to remain inactive or attribute responsibility for the derogation to the victim (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). This analysis is much easier to accept if the victim himself has sufficient resources to attenuate the damage suffered (Walster, Berscheid & Walster, 1973).

Beyond estimating the level of injustice and attributing responsibility for the situation to one of its protagonists, the witness's reaction also depends on the extent to which he identifies with the victim.

IDENTIFYING WITH THE VICTIM

The instrumental model tells us that identification is above all a matter of self-interest, whereas according to the deontic model it depends on the witness's personality (Folger, 2001), and under the relational model it is about social experiences (De Cremer & Van Hiel, 2006).

If the witness believes in a just world, i.e. accepts the principle that people "get what they deserve and deserve what they get" (Lerner, 1980), he will tend not to identify with the victim. This belief in the honesty and legitimacy of the social system generally (Kay, Jost & Young, 2005) is based on a fundamental need: the need to believe that the world is built on logic, that it is stable and ordered (Lerner, 1980). Without this, committing to social interactions would be a much more hazardous affair. This is a powerful defense mechanism (Haynes & Olson, 2006): by avoiding behaving as the victim of an injustice, the witness believes he is protecting himself. Two types of reactions can be anticipated when one's beliefs are threatened: irrational reactions which might involve denying the effect, i.e. the victim's suffering or the harmful nature of the situation for the victim, or rational reactions in which, more or less consciously, the causal attribution of responsibility is modified so the victim can be isolated and refused the benefit of altruistic prosocial behavior. If the victim's effective or supposed behavior justifies the ill treatment, then a witness with a strong just world belief will tend to feel that he does not deserve any help in coping with the situation. This belief provides an instrumental explanation for the reaction, or rather for the lack of a reaction in favor of the victim. By remaining inactive, the witness's defense mechanism is preserved. In the situation being considered here, a strong just world belief should result in the witness attributing responsibility for the denigration to the victim rather than the author of the remarks, and not challenging his own propensity towards helping behavior in favor of the latter. In contrast, a weak just world belief should make him indecisive as to how to attribute responsibility for the injustice. This means that the image of the perpetrator generated by the factual characteristics of the situation should play an essential role in the witness's decision to refuse him any help, if needed. Therefore, regardless of the witness's personality and the social interactions he may have in the future or have had in the past with the protagonists in the situation, we propose the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 1: The witness's just world belief negatively moderates the relationship between his image of the perpetrator of an act of derogation in the workplace and his predisposition to help that person in a professional context.*

The moral imperative model suggests another explanation for this identification phenomenon leading to interpersonal helping. Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress and Gee (2002) note that a witness can react even when there has been no previous interaction with the victim. This is a deontic reaction and reveals a concern for justice as a moral principle. Witnesses for whom moral identity is preponderant in their self-definition adopt high moral standards that result in their identifying with the victim and condemning perpetrators of injustice (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). These

authors also identify other imperatives that might explain a deontic reaction (p. 538). Cynical hostility (Cook & Medley, 1954: 418), i.e. a tendency to consider others as "dishonest, asocial and mediocre", could be one such imperative. This is a personality trait (Abraham, 2000) that causes people to be disinclined to adopt helping behaviors (Andersson & Bateman, 1997). Such witnesses are unlikely to identify with the protagonists in the situation. Their predisposition to offer help should be weak regardless of the image which the factual circumstances of the situation cause them to have of the perpetrator. Conversely, a low level of cynical hostility means little prejudice in relation to others. As a result, the image that such a witness has of the perpetrator due to the factual characteristics of the situation should play an essential role in the decision of whether or not to help him. Irrespective of the witness's just world belief and of his past or present social interactions with the victim, we therefore propose the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2: The witness's level of cynical hostility negatively moderates the relationship between his image of the perpetrator of an act of derogation in the workplace and his predisposition to help that person in a professional context.*

Finally, prior and anticipated social interactions between the witness and the victim should influence the former's identification with the latter if the conclusions of the relational model are to be accepted (De Cremer & Van Hiel, 2006). Seen from this perspective, the support and help provided in the past by the victim are a sign of commitment that should encourage the witness to reciprocate (Biétry, Creusier, Camus & Laroche, 2014). This reciprocity is the result of the witness identifying with the victim. The interactions underpinning this process of identification also relate to the witness–perpetrator relationship: people who have not themselves been the victim of injustice are more indifferent to how others are treated, according to Lind, et al. (1998). Those who have adopt a more punitive stance (Lerner, Goldberg & Tetlock, 1998). Personal experience is therefore a preponderant point of reference. Having previously suffered an act of injustice in the workplace is a factor that can be expected to generate greater sensitivity to the actions of the perpetrator based on the factual characteristics of the situation. Such sensitivity should be attenuated where the witness has no previous direct experience of such injustice. It is therefore legitimate to make the following prediction irrespective of the witness's just world belief and personality:

> *Hypothesis 3: Previous experience of injustice in the workplace positively moderates the relationship between the witness's image of the perpetrator of an act of derogation in the workplace and his predisposition to help that person in a professional context.*

This means that several conditions must be present for a direct witness not to remain indifferent and for him to be disinclined to offer the perpetrator help in a professional context: 1) the witness's image of the perpetrator must have deteriorated due to his attribution of responsibility for the criticism; and 2) the witness must display specific intra-psychic (a weak just world belief), interpersonal (a low level of cynical hostility) and/or inter-group (personal experience of injustice) characteristics. The explanation in the theoretical literature for this moderation of the image–help relationship by one's personal characteristics is based on the witness's identification with the victim (Folger, 2001; Skarlicki & Kulik,

2005). The refusal to help is an example of one consequence among the wider set of possible reactions to interactional injustice.

POTENTIAL WITNESS REACTIONS

There is therefore no guarantee of how the witness will react to the perpetrator of an act of injustice. His reaction can come in various forms and may also be oriented towards the other protagonists in the situation: himself or the victim. These potential reactions are schematized in Figure 1.
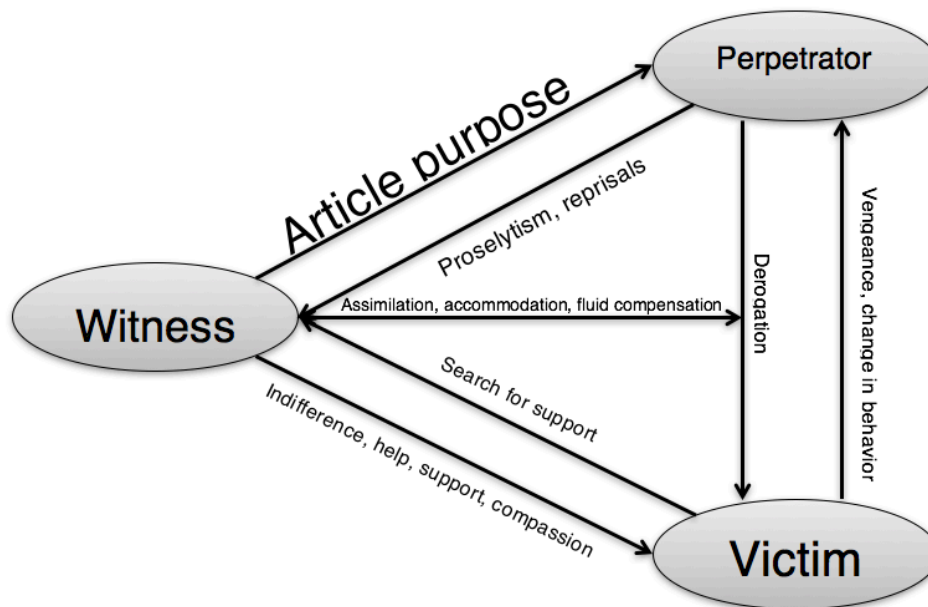

Figure 1. Potential reactions to injustice

Drawing on the work of Kuhn (1962), Zhu, et al. (2012) suggest that the witness to an act of injustice may initially respond to the meaning threat brought about by the injustice in three ways—assimilation, accommodation or fluid compensation—to avoid experiencing a state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1954). All of these solutions are processes of rationalization that help maintain a positive self-image. Assimilation involves reinterpreting the unjustified act in a way that makes it coherent with one's personal belief structure. When this is not possible, that structure must be modified through a process of accommodation. The associations that characterize that structure are then transformed. Finally, the meaning maintenance model (Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006) tells us that the witness may respond with fluid compensation, which means simply adhering to a different meaning structure to compensate. Someone described as stupid, for example, may be complemented by the witness for their physical appearance (Zhu, et al., 2012). However, the last two solutions—accommodation and compensation—take a long time as they require significant cognitive effort. In any case, this model explains why a witness may appear not to react to an act of injustice. It is simply a matter of desensitizing oneself to the type of event witnessed by modifying one's standards of acceptable behavior.

The witness's reaction may also relate to the victim, who might be incriminated if he himself brought about the situation. Such stigmatization may result in rancor and worsen the relationship between the witness and the victim. In contrast, the witness may react with emotional support or compassion, by lending an ear to the victim to attenuate his suffering, or with empathy or advice on how to extricate himself from the situation (Mayer, 2012). Similarly, the witness may encourage the victim to develop an awareness of the intentionality of the ill treatment (Barley, 1991) and respond to the perpetrator himself (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). If the norm of reciprocity is respected (Gouldner, 1960), a more positive spiral of social exchanges between the witness and the victim is triggered.

The quality of the social link generated between them may even encourage the witness to take it upon himself to tackle the perpetrator. If his feelings are not overwhelming, he will try to restore justice by having a direct, frank and non-combative conversation with the perpetrator (Mayer, 2012). However, if he experiences overly intense negative reactional emotions, he will try to punish the perpetrator (Turillo, et al., 2002). These emotions may include hostility, contempt, disgust, sadness, upset, disappointment, embarrassment or pain (Baumeister, Vohs & Zhang, 2004). Punishment can be direct, that is to say visible, such as public blame. It can also be covert, for example by trying to involve people with sufficient power to deal directly with the perpetrator, or by the witness reducing the level of help offered to the perpetrator (Brockner, Tyler & Cooper-Schneider, 1992). This may trigger a cycle of vengeance.

The concepts tested in our experiment on each of the three levels of analysis are summarized in Figure 2.
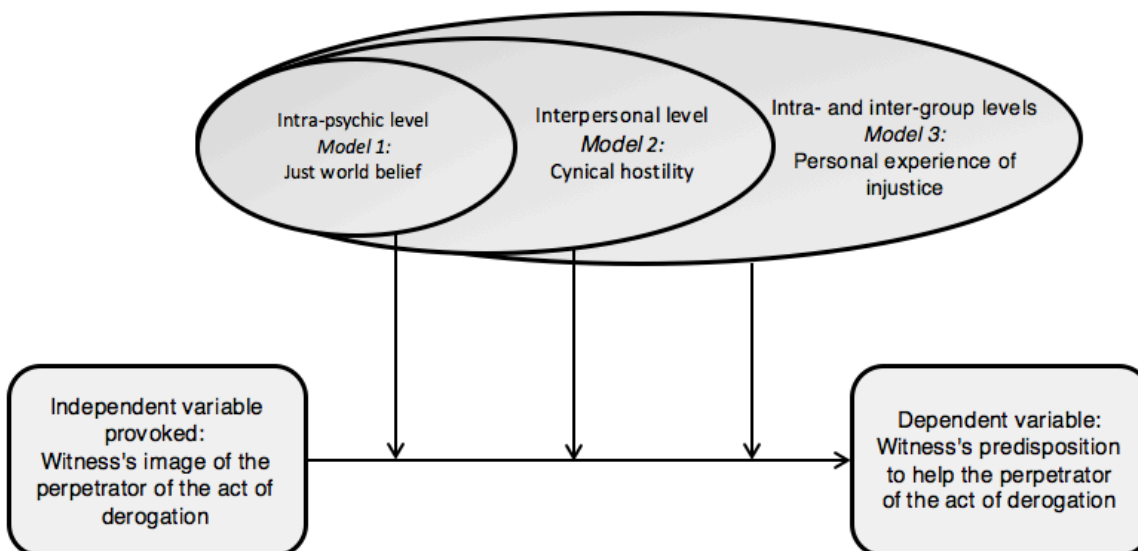

Figure 2. Concepts tested per level of analysis

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS

An experiment based on two scenarios (Meyer & Walter, 2003) was conducted to test the influence of these concepts, adopting an inter-subject design with two conditions: the witness's image of the perpetrator is manipulated by the level of injustice of the situation, while the witness's predisposition towards inter-helping behaviors (dependent variable), just world belief, level of cynical hostility and personal experience of injustice (moderator variables) are measured using 7-point Likert-type scales.

To ensure the effectiveness of these experiment scenario, a pre-test was carried out on 40 employees, 20 for each version of the text. The objective was to calibrate the average amount of relevant data memorized by participants and to adjust the wording to perfect the desired inductions (Delhomme & Meyer, 2002), in this case attribution of responsibility for the act of derogation. The final test was carried out individually in laboratory conditions so as to avoid contamination effects through the activation of stereotypes at the time of interpreting the event (Kelley, 1973). All 223 participants in the final experiment were employed or looking for work and completing a professional training course at our university at the time of the study. They were recruited on a voluntary basis, and their anonymity was assured.

We confirmed the validity of our experimental protocol using ten propositions which participants were asked to deem true or false having read one of the two scenarios and four additional propositions relating to the victim's behavior and attitude. The first propositions were used to ensure that the factual information in the text was properly memorized. The second set was used to control the effectiveness of the manipulation that led to responsibility for the derogation being attributed, thereby influencing the witness's image of the perpetrator. Of the 223 participants, only 17 (7.6%) obtained scores of less than 75%. Although arbitrary, this 75% threshold is a useful indicator of the experimental protocol's validity. We also ensured there was no data collection bias using the procedure recommended by Lambert and Harrington (1990)[1]. We further conducted the test developed by Armstrong and Overton (1977) to ensure the absence of non-response bias[2].   The final sample presents the characteristics presented in Table 1.

1. We compared the sociodemographic characteristics of the first respondents (n = 113) against those of the remaining respondents (n = 112). Specifically, we used a t-test to test differences in age (t = -0.381; p = 0.703), gender (t = 1.690; p = 0.092) and seniority (t = 1.109; p = 0.268). No difference was observed. Data collection bias is therefore not a problem in this study.

2. This involves comparing the responses of the first 20 respondents with those of the last 20. Three items on the questionnaire were randomly selected and a chi-squared test was conducted for each one. The results reveal that p is systematically greater than 0.01 and therefore non-significant for each item: CYN5 ($p = 0.524$); CMJ3 ($p = 0.155$); ENTREAIDE2 ($p = 0.546$). This tells us that non-response bias is not a problem in this study.

Age	n
Under 30	96
31 to 40	51
41 or over	76
Status	
Workers and other employees	36
Technicians and engineers	27
Management	78
Other	82
Gender	
Male	125
Female	98
Education	
Baccalaureate or lower	3
Bachelor's degree	82
Master's degree	125
Above master's level	13
Company	
Public or semi-public sector	38
Private sector	139
Tiers sector	46

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

EXPERIMENT PROTOCOL

The two scenarios placed respondents in the position of a witness to an act of derogation in the workplace. The protocol included three phases: 1) completion by each respondent of an initial questionnaire with the purpose of measuring their just world belief and level of cynical hostility and determining their personal characteristics; 2) an individual reading of one of two versions of a scenario randomly assigned; 3) individual completion of a second questionnaire used to measure their level of attention while reading, the effectiveness of inducing their attribution of responsibility for the denigration, i.e. their sense of injustice, their attitudinal reaction to the perpetrator, and lastly their personal experience of injustice in the workplace. Following a common thread, the first version of the text invited respondents to attribute responsibility to the victim, in other words to adopt the view that he deserved what he got because of his behavior and professional results. The second clearly implicated the perpetrator, with the victim in no way at fault (see Appendix). The controlled variables are those highlighted in the review of the literature. They are summarized in Table 2 with the manipulated variable and the independent and dependent variables.

Variables	Nature of variables	Means used
Image of perpetrator based on causal attribution identified by witness	Independent variable provoked (manipulated)	Good working conditions in both scenarios Scenario 1: witness is punctual but performs poorly both in terms of quantity and quality, difficult temperament, "poor colleague" Scenario 2: witness performs well > in line with quantitative and qualitative objectives, punctual, and helpful, introverted, demanding + multiple acts of derogation Verified by questionnaire 2
Just world belief	Moderator: Instrumental	Measured by first questionnaire
Cynical hostility	Moderator: Moral	Measured by first questionnaire
Experience of injustice	Moderator: Relational	Measured by second questionnaire
Predisposition towards inter-helping behaviors	Dependent variable	Measured by second questionnaire
Controlled variables		
Power balance between perpetrator/ witness/victim (risk of retaliation)	Instrumental	Hierarchical positions presented as equivalent No power imbalance No competition between parties
Cost/benefit of reaction	Instrumental	Nothing to gain or lose for the witness, as the victim belongs to another department
Victim's power to defend himself	Relational	Weak, low on the hierarchy, no particular resources with which to react
Positive reactions with regard to the victim (help, support, listening, etc.)	Relational	No possible interaction with victim
Assimilation, accommodation, compensation by witness	Existential	Immediate response to second questionnaire after reading the scenario Verification of the attribution of responsibility for denigration

Table 2. Status of experiment variables

MEASURES

To measure just world belief, a short six-item scale (Dalbert, Montada & Schmitt, 1987) was used in the first questionnaire due to its metric qualities, unidimensionality and multiple international validations (Furnham, 2003). "I am confident that whatever happens fairness will ultimately triumph in the world" is one of the items used in this scale. The second measurement scale used is the cynical hostility scale developed by Cook and Medley (1954), reduced to nine items and validated by Greenglass and Julkunen (1989). "Most people have friends because it can be useful for them to do so" is one of the items used. Given that strong links were observed between acts of interpersonal aggression and/or the reactions generated on the one hand, and gender (Hershcovis, et al., 2007), age (Foster, 2004), and hierarchical status (Georgesen & Harris, 1998) on the other, these characteristics were also controlled for in our

sample of respondents. To limit the risk of common variance bias, questions relating to sociodemographic variables were inserted between the cynical hostility scale and the just world belief scale, in line with the recommendations of Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003). The second questionnaire was presented to respondents once they had read the scenario. It included a measure of comprehension/memorization of the factual information relating to the victim and the perpetrator. The scale developed by Turnley and Bolino (2001) was then used to ask respondents to judge the image of the perpetrator in respect of two dimensions—congenial vs contemptuous—each of which was evaluated based on four desirable and four undesirable items: "congenial, cooperative, likeable, agreeable" vs "conceited, self-righteous, moralistic, self-important". They were then asked to express their predisposition to help the perpetrator. For this, we used the scale developed by Podsakoff and MacKenzie (1994). "Would you be willing to give up your time to help Mr Bruny *[perpetrator of the act of denigration]* if he had work-related problems?" is one of the items used. Finally, a single-item scale of frequency—"Do you yourself feel like a victim of injustice in the workplace?"—was introduced in the second questionnaire.

DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The validity of each of the scales used was first verified via confirmatory factorial analyses using Amos v21. A correlation matrix that included all of the concepts used in the study was then drawn up to ensure the absence of multicollinearity. It also presents the Cronbach's alpha values for each scale.

Once the scales had been validated, moderation tests using the macro "Process", available under SPSS and developed by Hayes and Preacher (2014), were conducted. These were then used to evaluate the moderator effects of just world belief (H1), followed by cynical hostility (H2) and personal experience of injustice (H3) on the relationship between the image of the perpetrator and witness predispositions towards inter-helping behavior. Once the test was conclusive, the investigation continued with a study of the results of our moderated regressions with moderator values of more or less one standard deviation either side of the mean of the moderator. The results were also obtained using the macro "Process", which ultimately enabled us to produce graphics illustrating the different cases encountered and test our sub-hypotheses.

RESULTS

CONFIRMATORY ANALYSIS

The measurement models revealed the adjustment indices shown in Table 3.

Model	Rχ²(ddl)	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Cynicism scale	13.22(9)	0.98	0.98	0.97	0.04
Just world belief scale	27.48(9)	0.96	0.92	0.87	0.09
Image of perpetrator scale	37.27(19)	0.96	0.98	0.97	0.06
Inter-helping scale	15.41(5)	0.97	0.97	0.95	0.09

Rχ²: Chi² associated with the robust maximum likelihood estimator; GFI: goodness of fit index, CFI: comparative fit index, TLI: Tucker-Lewis index, RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation

Table 3. Confirmatory analysis results

Most of the indices are satisfactory as they are higher (GFI, CFI, TLI) or lower (RMSEA) than the standards widely accepted by the scientific community. Only the TLI for the just world belief scale and the RMSEA for both the just world belief and inter-helping scales come close to, although do not perfectly satisfy, the highly demanding standards of certain authors such as Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2010). These measurements nonetheless are acceptable in respect of the other criteria. Once the scales' metric qualities had been established, a correlation matrix was drawn up as shown in Table 4.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
CYN	*(0.764)*							
JWB	-0.135*	*(0.750)*						
HELP	-0.146*	0.182**	*(0.855)*					
IMGPER	-0,036	-0.092	0.335**	(0.800)				
AGE	-0.043	0.066	-0.013	0.092				
EDUC	-0.067	-0.015	0.036	0.002	0.139*			
GENDER	-0.018	0.039	-0.127	-0.204**	0.053	-0.084		
STATUS	-0.09	-0.025	0.072	0.015	-0.004	-0.003	-0.022	
JOB	-0.035	0.086	0.091	0.064	-0.028	0.092	-0.064	-0.159*

*Sig. level of 0.05; **Sig. level of 0.01; Cronbach's alpha values appear between parentheses on the diagonal; CYN: cynical hostility; JWB: just world belief; IMGPER: image of perpetrator; EDUC: education

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations

No strong correlation emerged between the concepts studied or between these concepts and the sociodemographic variables. There would therefore appear to be no problem of multicollinearity in this study. The Cronbach's alpha values indicated on the diagonal are all acceptable as they are higher than 0.7.

MODERATOR EFFECTS

Once the scales had been validated, we were able to conduct the first test (intra-psychic level) of the moderator effect of just world belief on the relationship between the image of the perpetrator and the predisposition towards inter-helping behavior.

	B	SD	R²	R² change	p
Inter-helping					
Phase 1			0.179		0.000
JWB	0.787	0.239			0.001
IMGPER	0.726	0.179			0.000
Phase 2				0.021	0.016
Interaction	-0.020	0.008			

CMJ: just world belief; IMGDENIG: image of perpetrator

Table 5. Results: moderator effect of just world belief

Table 5 shows that just world belief does indeed moderate the relationship between the image of the perpetrator and the predisposition towards inter-helping behavior: the interaction test is significant and negative: $p = 0.016$. The results of the moderated regression are presented in Table 6.

JWB	Effect	SD	P
15.55	0.410	0.067	0.000
21.52	0.288	0.055	0.000
27.48	0.166	0.081	0.046

CMJ: just world belief

Table 6. Results: regression moderated by just world belief

We note that the moderator effect becomes weaker as its value increases. These results are presented in Figure 3 to facilitate their interpretation.
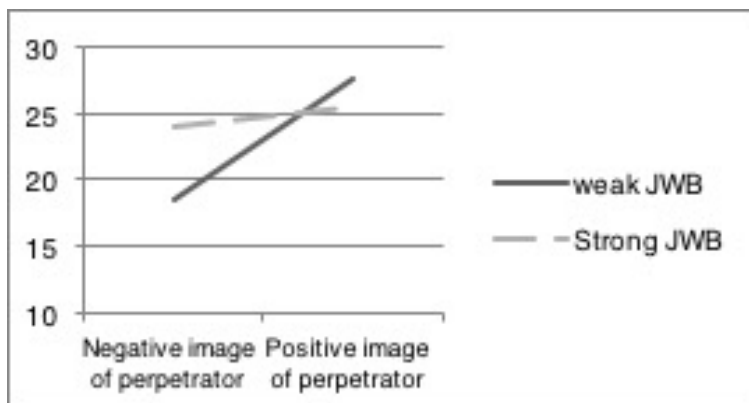

Figure 3. Illustration: regression moderated by just world belief

This figure reveals first of all that the predisposition of a witness with a weak just world belief to offer help to the perpetrator of an act of derogation in a professional context is weaker when he has a negative image of the perpetrator. It also appears that the predisposition of a witness with a strong just world belief to offer help to the perpetrator is less affected by the image he has of that person. Taken together, these results support H1: *The witness's just world belief negatively moderates the relationship between his image of the perpetrator of an act of derogation in the workplace and his predisposition to help that person in a professional context.*

Following the transition to the interpersonal level, we tested the moderator effect of cynical hostility on the relationship between the image of the perpetrator and the predisposition towards inter-helping behavior. Table 7 presents these results.

	β	SD	R²	R² change	*P*
Inter-helping					
Phase 1			0.131		0.000
CYN	-0.087	0.229			0.705
IMGPER	0.341	0.183			0.063
Phase 2				0.000	0.778
Interaction	-0.002	0.008			

Table 7. Results: moderator effect of cynical hostility

This table reveals that cynical hostility has no moderator effect. Neither the simple regression nor the interaction present significant values. Our results do not therefore support H2: The witness's level of cynical hostility negatively moderates the relationship between his image of the perpetrator of an act of derogation in the workplace and his predisposition to help that person in a professional context.

Similar investigations can be conducted at intra- and inter-group levels, i.e. by testing the moderator effect of the injustice experienced by the witness on the relationship between the image of the perpetrator and the predisposition towards inter-helping behavior. Table 8 presents the results of this test.

	B	SD	R²	R² change	*p*
Inter-helping					
Phase 1			0.158		0.000
INJUST	0.327	0.210			0.000
IMGPER	0.165	0.150			0.271
Phase 2				42	0.001
Interaction	0.260	0.078			

Table 8. Results: moderator effect of injustice experienced by the witness

Our results reveal that the witness's personal experience of injustice does indeed have a positive moderator effect on the relationship between the image of the perpetrator and the predisposition towards inter-helping behavior. The analysis can now shift to a moderated regression, the results of which are presented in Table 9.

INJUST	Effect	SD	P
1.095	0.120	0.076	0.118
1.829	0.311	0.055	0.000
2.563	0.503	0.082	0.000

Table 9. Results: regression moderated by personal experience of injustice

Here we see that the moderator effect becomes stronger as its value increases. These results are presented in Figure 4 to facilitate their interpretation.
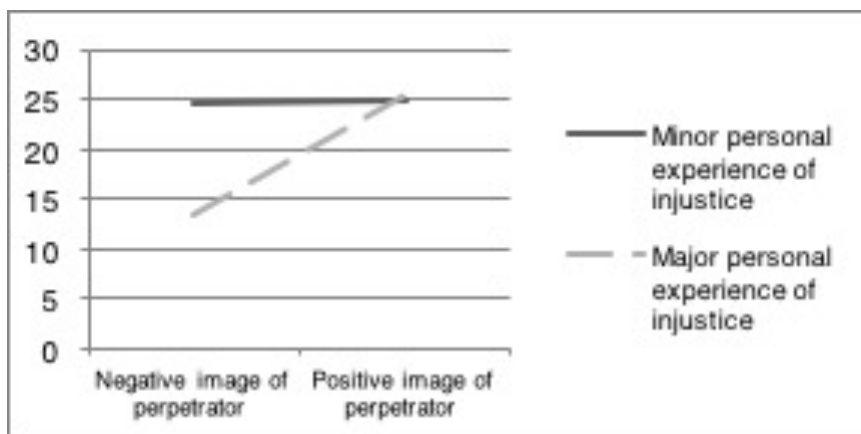

Figure 4. Illustration: regression moderated by witness's
personal experience of injustice

The predisposition of a witness who sees himself as a victim of injustice in the workplace to offer help to the perpetrator of an act of derogation in a professional context is weaker when he has a negative image of that person. However, we once again note that the predisposition of a witness who does not see himself as a victim of injustice in the workplace to offer such help displays little sensitivity to the image he has of the perpetrator. The results therefore support H3: *Previous experience of injustice in the workplace positively moderates the relationship between the witness's image of the perpetrator of an act of derogation in the workplace and his predisposition to help that person in a professional context.*

DISCUSSION

The aim underpinning this experiment was to make an original contribution to our understanding of the process that results in a witness reacting to an act of inter-peer interactional injustice, in this case an act of derogation in the workplace. The influence of two moderator variables, respectively instrumental and relational, is demonstrated: just world belief and personal experience of injustice. The witness's cynical hostility does not appear to be of significant importance.

In this respect, we make several original contributions: first, this study provides an original synthesis of the three theoretical models outlined earlier, which it complements by revealing two significant new influences; second, it explores a scenario of injustice frequently encountered in the workplace (inter-peer denigration) although little studied in theoretical terms; lastly, it explains a behavior (inter-helping) that is essential for the smooth running of organizations. The results, obtained from empirical data provided by employees rather than students with little or no experience of the workplace, have ramifications both for organizations and the protagonists who find themselves in this kind of situation. They warn of the dangers of derogation in the workplace, demonstrating that its effects can under certain conditions extend beyond the direct victim.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Drawing on the self-interest (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005), moral imperative ("deontic") (Folger, 2001) and relational response (Dunford, et al., 2015) models, as well as on our empirical results, it is possible to schematically represent the process that leads a witness to react to an act of injustice in the workplace as shown in Figure 5.
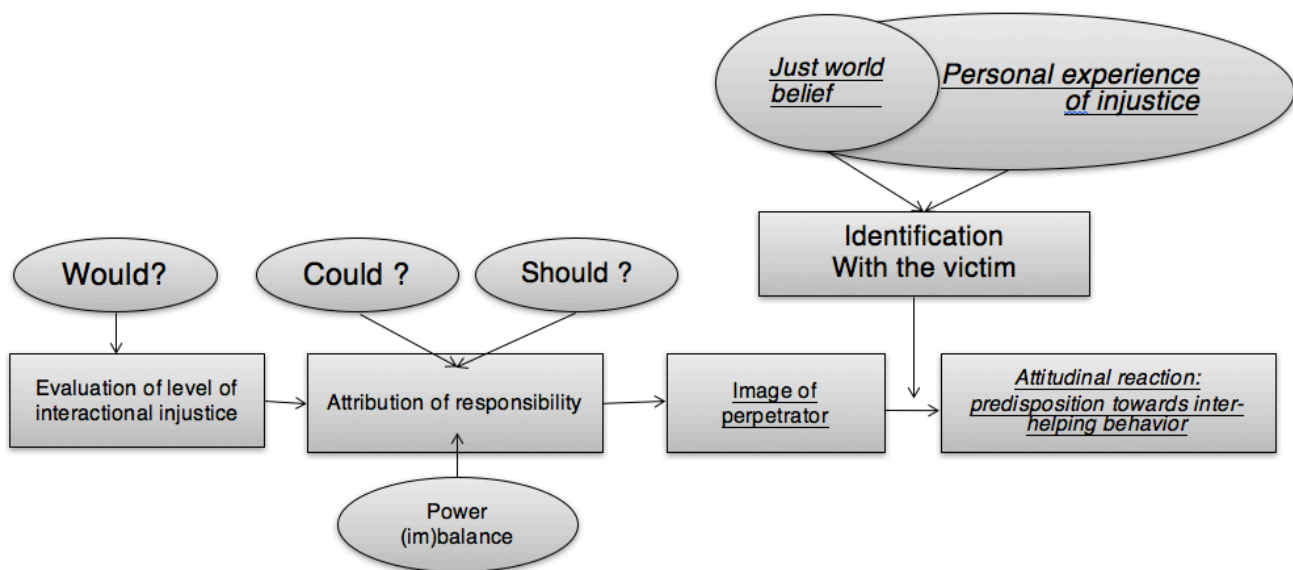
Underlined italics: variables tested in the experiment

Figure 5: Psychological process underpinning a witness's reaction to an act of derogation in the workplace

The introduction of just world belief and personal experience of injustice to the analysis allows us to understand under what conditions inter-peer derogation can have a negative attitudinal impact beyond the perpetrator–victim relationship. To generate these more or less latent conflicts but which undoubtedly are a destructive force for the organization, the act of derogation must first of all be considered unjust by witnesses with a weak just world belief, whose perception of the mindset and stability of the social system is highly uncertain and does not systematically lead them to incriminate the victim. When neither accommodation nor fluid compensation is possible for them due to a lack of time, their identification with the perpetrator or with the victim is determined more by the factual characteristics of the situation than by their belief system. The unjust derogation is therefore sanctioned by the weak predisposition to offer help to the perpetrator and is seen either as a pure act of malevolence ("evil tongue"), i.e. an attempt to make the most of the victim's absence to "settle a score", as an outburst or as entertainment (Foster, 2004). In such a scenario, where the perpetrator deserves what he gets, the likelihood that the witnesses will suffer from a guilty conscience for acting in this way is low. Indeed, they are willing to expose themselves to an act of vengeance on the part of the perpetrator in order to restore justice. They perceive this risk to be low as they have a weak just world belief; in other words, they do not feel that they could protect themselves from future derogation by clearly distancing themselves from the victim. In contrast, when the act of derogation is considered just, witnesses with a weak just world belief more clearly identify with the perpetrator. In this case, the denigration is much less sanctioned since it is seen as efficiently serving an informative function with regard to the behaviors that are to be tolerated or rejected (Baumeister, et al., 2004) and more generally the social norms that govern the group. Such valuable information is naturally exchanged for a stronger propensity towards inter-helping behavior.

Inter-peer derogation can also have an impact beyond the perpetrator–victim relationship when the witness himself has had personal experience of injustice in the workplace. However, according to Linstead (2013), this negative experience must have been repeated in order for the witness not to react simply as an "organizational bystander", i.e. with indifference. The accumulation of such events does not desensitize the witness, but rather encourages him to become a "helpful altruistic bystander" by triggering a residual effect in the form of rancor. By indirectly sanctioning the perpetrator, the witness avoids feeling complicit in actions which he condemns, having himself suffered the costs of similar actions. Remaining passive in the face of the symbolic violence of an unfounded act of derogation under the pretext of "not meddling in other people's affairs" would betray a certain inconsistency: the witness cannot adopt a neutral position (Linstead, 2013) since passivity would be synonymous with permissiveness or—even worse—encouragement of an act that he deplores. Abdication and avoidance would imply moral responsibility, a form of cowardice or complicity that would clearly be difficult for the witness to bear. Weakening his predisposition to offer help, since to do so would be insidious, is a way for the witness to resolve the conflict of interest between his intra-personal authenticity (Ménard & Brunet, 2012), i.e. his self-loyalty, and his vulnerability in the face of the perpetrator. Managers should also be aware of the dangers of permissiveness in response to derogation: by tolerating such actions, especially when unjust, permissiveness allows them to propagate and runs the risks of seeing extra-role behaviors between colleagues become increasingly rare and ultimately seeing a deterioration in collective performance. In this respect, the interests of both

the organization and the individual witness, who is also a victim of injustice, converge.

In contrast, the witness's level of cynical hostility appears to have no effect on his predisposition towards inter-helping behavior in favor of the perpetrator. High scorers for this variable indicate a strong tendency to consider others dishonest or asocial. People with this personality trait have a negative view of those around them and apparently find it just as hard to identify with the victim as with the perpetrator. This means they have no reason to modify their usual attitudes when they witness an act of derogation. They might be said to be "outside the game". A high level of cynical hostility also tends to make witnesses see themselves as victims, according to Abraham (2000). Because they feel that no-one came to help them when they needed it, witnesses with this character trait consequently do not offer any help either, thus respecting the principle of reciprocity.

Whatever the circumstances, it is in the interest of managers to combat injustice generally, and derogation in particular, if they are to avoid incivility gradually becoming the organizational norm. However, taking action against workplace derogation is a considerable managerial challenge to the extent that it is very difficult to control (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Managerial actions can nonetheless target the other two protagonists in the situation: the perpetrator and the victim.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE THREE PROTAGONISTS

The first thing a manager can do is to approach the perpetrator and make it clear that derogation is an inappropriate self-promotion strategy not only for moral but also instrumental reasons: criticizing others in their absence runs the risk of being sanctioned in turn since one cannot know the extent to which the witness believes in a just world. This is what makes such a self-image strategy (Fein & Spencer, 1997) dangerous. Seeking to promote oneself by drawing a contrast with the victim can achieve the reverse outcome. Under the conditions outlined above, the designated victim of the derogation is not necessarily the only one who ends up being penalized. The perpetrator can be affected by his own criticism. Unable to benefit from inter-helping behaviors, he faces the danger of being gradually marginalized in the organization. To avoid this, managers can develop internal communication and ensure that a climate of internal rivalry is not fostered. Wert and Salovey (2004) demonstrated that failing to act in this way raises the likelihood of workplace derogation. Communication efforts must aim for greater congruence between the values of the potential perpetrator and the organization so the former does not have to feign his emotions. Without such congruence, the disparity between his personal identity and professional role will be a source of disgust and ultimately lead to the derogation of those who openly embody or adhere to the organization's values. A perceived threat against a skill in a climate of competition between employees presents a similar risk, especially among those with little power (Cho & Fast, 2012).

It is also possible for managers to take action in favor of potential victims of workplace derogation. Two sets of antecedents are identified by Bowling and Beehr (2006): they relate to the work environment and personal characteristics. The organization may in the first instance be held responsible for the situation, particularly when it is a stressful environment and maintains a permissive culture. Stress makes people fragile, and employees who suffer from it are easy targets for would-be denigrators. Major power imbalances are also conducive to derogation as they produce a cost–benefit ratio that is potentially very favorable for the perpetrator. A

potential victim who displays a personality profile marked by submission further accentuates this risk. The same is true of behaviors associated with anger, fear, anguish, sadness and depression, which make the person in question seem hostile, demanding and socially difficult (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Once an employee has been labeled as a victim, his actions are over-interpreted. In other words, what was previously considered normal becomes associated with that label and the depreciation process becomes self-sustaining (Taylor, Wood & Lichtman, 1983). The victim then gradually internalizes these responses and ultimately also perceives himself in the same light. Managerial action in this case involves combating stress in the workplace and helping victims to engage in self-work to modify their behavior. All of these theoretical and practical conclusions must, however, be considered with caution to the extent that our experiment presents certain limitations and further research is needed.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

Several precautions were taken to guarantee the internal validity of the experiment conducted, notably the decision to recruit employees rather than students with no work experience as our respondents. Despite this, some variables are difficult to control in laboratory conditions. This is true of the level of sympathy which the witness extends to the victim. This specific feature of their relationship, built up over the course of social interactions, also exerts a direct (Haynes & Olson, 2006) or moderating (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) influence on the intensity of the threat against one's just world belief. Unfortunately it is impossible to reproduce artificially. Similarly, a real-life work situation could be less polarized than the two scenarios used. It could be more ambiguous and result in a less exclusive attribution of responsibility for the act of denigration. This could affect the witness's reaction. Two other variables probably have an effect on witness reactions: their confidence—based on past experience—in the institutional mechanisms designed to punish those responsible for acts of injustice; and their propensity to feel distressed and dissatisfied when faced with negative life events (Watson & Clark, 1984). This negative affectivity score can be said to increase the likelihood of and tendency towards a reaction, if the conclusions of Larsen and Ketelaar (1991) are to be accepted. Taken together, these variables could enrich the existing corpus of knowledge focused on the consequences of organizational injustice. Various facets of workplace denigration could also be explored and produce more refined conclusions: the nature of the triggering event itself (Furnham, 2003), the content of the denigratory remarks (professional or personal?), differences in the power and status of the protagonists within the social network of the organization, and the influence of other witnesses on how the act of injustice is perceived (Lind, et al., 1998). In methodological terms, another limitation in this study is the number of participants, which was not high enough to test for the possibility of multiple interaction effects between the moderators within a single model (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2013). In this respect, it would be useful to conduct structural equation analyses to refine the conclusions from a statistical perspective. Finally, measuring the persistence over time of the negative effects of derogation on the witness and on the organization would make a welcome contribution to knowledge in this area.

APPENDIX

Scenario 1 *(NDLR: attribution of responsibility to the victim)*:

Mr Legoupil is an employee with a big production company that employs more than 1,000 people. It has posted steady profits for several years without interruption. Mr Legoupil has worked there for 17 years as a level-2 professional worker. He moved up from level 3 to level 2 five years after joining the company. Since then, he has been unable to secure a promotion to level 1 despite several requests. He feels he has been unfairly prevented from advancing his career as he has all the diplomas and necessary qualifications for the position he holds. He always arrives at work on time and never leaves his post early. However, he cannot manage to produce the same number of parts as his colleagues. Nor is he able to meet the quality standards in force. Within his team, he does not really have a very good reputation. He is often in a bad mood and tends to isolate himself and work on his own. He doesn't help others when asked, and according to his co-workers he is often ill-tempered. In short, he is not necessarily seen as a "good colleague".

Because he has been denied a promotion to level 1, he only benefits from very occasional annual salary increases, i.e. those given to all company employees. He has not been granted an individual pay increase for 12 years. Legally speaking, his employer is acting within the law since Mr Legoupil's salary meets the minimum amount stipulated in the collective agreement for level-2 professional workers. His working conditions are identical to those of other employees and are acceptable. This post involves low levels of hardship. Although the company is divided into different teams, it only operates during traditional office hours, and employee timetables are stable from one week to the next. Mr Legoupil's job does not involve any repetitive or clocked tasks and, like his colleagues, he does not have to maintain an awkward posture or carry heavy loads. He is exposed to neither dangerous chemical agents nor extreme temperatures.

You are an employee in the same company as Mr Legoupil but work in a different department. He works in production and you are in administration. You are not therefore in competition with him for a promotion. You do not know him personally but you have heard about his professional situation. You discussed it with one of your colleagues, Mr Bruny, who had not dealt personally or professionally with Mr Legoupil either. Here is what he had to say about Mr Legoupil:

– OK, so he hasn't had a pay increase in 12 years. OK, so he's still waiting to be promoted to level 1. But in my opinion he might be waiting a long time. Have you seen his output? Some of his colleagues do a lot better than him. And then there's the quality... From what I've heard, it's frankly not great. Who does he think he is? His work is rubbish; actually he only thinks about himself. And apparently several of his colleagues have even complained about him. Every time someone asks for help, he says no! He's always grumpy. I've heard he always makes people feel like they're bothering him. I don't know him well personally, but frankly I can't imagine myself working with him. Never willing to help, always in a bad mood, forever complaining about the slightest detail. Some atmosphere! Apparently he's never been heard to make even the smallest constructive proposal within his team. He never volunteers for anything. And have you seen what time he leaves? No danger of him putting in extra hours. For him, home time is home time, that you can be sure of. The fact is, Legoupil only thinks about himself. He gives off the appearance of a guy who does his job, but you can't depend on him.

Scenario 2 *(NDLR: attribution of responsibility to the perpetrator)*:

Mr Legoupil is an employee with a big production company that employs more than 1,000 people. It has posted steady profits for several years without interruption. Mr Legoupil has worked there for 17 years as a level-2 professional worker. He moved up from level 3 to level 2 five years after joining the company. Since then, he has been unable to secure a promotion to level 1 despite several requests. He feels he has been unfairly prevented from advancing his career as he has all the diplomas and necessary qualifications for the position he holds. What's more, all the indicators show that his performance at work is very strong and even above average compared to his colleagues. He produces more than the number of parts expected of him and manages to meet the quality standards in force. He always arrives on time and never leaves his post early. Mr Legoupil is generally in good humor and is willing to help his fellow team members when asked. However, he is quite introverted and demanding. He tends to be quite intolerant of other people's errors. He works mostly on his own but never shies away from his duties.

Because he has been denied a promotion to level 1, he only benefits from very occasional annual salary increases, i.e. those given to all company employees. He has not been granted an individual pay increase for 12 years. Legally speaking, his employer is acting within the law since Mr Legoupil's salary meets the minimum amount stipulated in the collective agreement for level-2 professional workers. His working conditions are identical to those of other employees and are acceptable. This post involves low levels of hardship. Although the company is divided into different teams, it only operates during traditional office hours, and employee timetables are stable from one week to the next. Mr Legoupil's job does not involve any repetitive or clocked tasks and, like his colleagues, he does not have to maintain an awkward posture or carry heavy loads. He is exposed to neither dangerous chemical agents nor extreme temperatures.

You are an employee in the same company as Mr Legoupil but work in a different department. He works in production and you are in administration. You are not therefore in competition with him for a promotion. You do not know him personally but you have heard about his professional situation. You discussed it with one of your colleagues, Mr Bruny, who had not dealt personally or professionally with Mr Legoupil either. Here is what he had to say about Mr Legoupil:
– OK, so he hasn't had a pay increase in 12 years. OK, so he's still waiting to be promoted to level 1. But in my opinion he might be waiting a long time. Have you seen his output? Some of his colleagues do a lot better than him. And then there's the quality... From what I've heard, it's frankly not great. Who does he think he is? His work is rubbish; actually he only thinks about himself. And apparently several of his colleagues have even complained about him. Every time someone asks for help, he says no! He's always grumpy. I've heard he always makes people feel like they're bothering him. I don't know him well personally, but frankly I can't imagine myself working with him. Never willing to help, always in a bad mood, forever complaining about the slightest detail. Some atmosphere! Apparently he's never been heard to make even the smallest constructive proposal within his team. He never volunteers for anything. And have you seen what time he leaves? No danger of him putting in extra hours. For him, home time is home time, that you can be sure of. The fact is, Legoupil is like Gérard from the quality control workshop: he only thinks about himself. He gives off the appearance of a guy who does his job, but you can't depend on him. There are more people in the company like him than you might think.

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