ON THE EXCHANGE OF HOSTILITY WITH SUPERVISORS: AN EXAMINATION OF SELF-ENHANCING AND SELF-DEFEATING PERSPECTIVES

BENNETT J. TEPPER
The Ohio State University

MARIE S. MITCHELL
University of Georgia

DANA L. HAGGARD
Missouri State University

HO KWONG KWAN
Shanghai University of Finance and Economics

HEE-MAN PARK
The Ohio State University

We invoke competing theoretical perspectives to examine the consequences for subordinates of involvement in relationships that vary in terms of downward hostility (i.e., hostility enacted by supervisors against direct reports) and upward hostility (i.e., hostility enacted by subordinates against immediate supervisors). Consistent with the perspective that targets of downward hostility are less likely to see themselves as victims when they perform acts of upward hostility, analysis of 2-wave data from a sample of supervised employees suggested that upward hostility weakens the deleterious effects of downward hostility on subordinates’ job satisfaction, affective commitment, and psychological distress. Study 2 directly examined the presumed mechanism that underlies the effects observed in Study 1. In a 3-wave sample, support was found for a moderated-indirect effect framework in which the indirect effects of downward hostility on subordinates’ attitudes and psychological distress (through victim identity) were weaker when upward hostility was higher. Study 2 results also suggested that the enhancing effect of upward hostility generalizes to subjective indicators of career satisfaction and future career expectations.

Organizational authorities count on supervisory leaders to play a vital role in training and motivating direct reports to accomplish assigned
tasks, cultivating a safe and healthy work environment, and nurturing the leadership potential of promising junior colleagues. An extensive body of leadership research suggests that when it comes to the fulfillment of these and other high-priority organizational objectives, some supervisory leaders are more effective than are others (Bass, 1990). More recent research has focused on hostile acts executed by leaders against direct reports that undermine individual and unit effectiveness (Tepper, 2000, 2007). These forms of downward hostility include such things as yelling at, ridiculing, and intimidating direct reports. Scientific interest in downward hostility seems to be growing exponentially. Over 100 peer-reviewed articles on the topic are now in print, the majority of which have gone to publication since 2009. Owing to the accumulated empirical evidence suggesting that targets of downward hostility experience less favorable attitudes toward their job and organization and damage to their psychological well-being (see Schyns & Schilling, 2013, for a recent meta-analysis), it is likely that continued examination of the phenomenon is in the offing.

In one important respect, however, extant models of subordinate responses to downward hostility are underspecified. In brief, the research to date does not account for the idea that supervisor hostility is executed within the context of relationships that vary in terms of how much upward hostility subordinates execute against their supervisors (i.e., acts that are designed to frustrate and undermine supervisors such as refusing to perform or ignoring supervisor requests, acting rudely, and publicly embarrassing supervisors; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001). Failing to account for subordinate hostility when examining the effects of downward hostility would seem to be inconsistent with exchange theories of social relationships, which posit that the behavior of both parties influences relational trajectory and outcomes (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). To the extent that levels of upward hostility are relevant to understanding how subordinates respond to varying levels of downward hostility, it is essential that relevant models adopt a “relational” perspective (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Klaussner, 2014; Tepper & Almeda, 2012). Embracing a relational perspective involves a shift in focus away from an emphasis on the consequences of downward hostility and toward an acknowledgment that supervisor–subordinate relationships can trend from those in which neither party is hostile, toward those in which one party is more hostile than the other, toward those in which both parties express higher levels of hostility.

Accordingly, the overarching goal of our research was to examine subordinates’ responses to the joint effects of downward hostility and upward hostility, but our review of literature that speaks to this research agenda revealed some theoretical ambivalence. This is because for targets of downward hostility, performing acts of upward hostility comes
with both presumed costs (i.e., evoking further and potentially more serious downward hostility; Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006) and benefits (i.e., redressing perceived injustices; Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002). In other words, there is no consensus on whether subordinate targets of downward hostility are better off executing or withholding acts of upward hostility. Indeed, our examination of relevant theory provided the basis for competing predictions.

In the sections that follow, we discuss some of the detrimental consequences of exposure to downward hostility. Next, we present the theoretical bases for the competing predictions that, for subordinate targets of downward hostility, upward hostility is self-enhancing (i.e., upward hostility weakens the detrimental effects of downward hostility) and self-defeating (i.e., upward hostility strengthens the detrimental effects of downward hostility). We then present the results of a strong inference test (i.e., a systematic examination of hypotheses that pit competing theoretical perspectives against one another; Platt, 1964) with a two-wave sample of supervised employees. We next report the results of a second study that was designed to examine a broader portfolio of outcome variables and to directly examine the mechanisms underlying the perspectives that were examined in Study 1.

Hypothesis Development

Exposure to Downward Hostility and Subordinates’ Attitudes and Well-Being

Evidence suggests that exposure to downward hostility detrimentally influences subordinates’ attitudes toward their job and organization, as well as their psychological well-being (see Tepper, 2007, for a review). Most employees prefer safe and supportive work environments, job facets that tend to be in short supply when supervisors mistreat their direct reports. Consequently, targets of downward hostility experience little affective liking for their job (i.e., job satisfaction; Tepper, 2000). Supervisor hostility also undermines employees’ commitment toward the employer. The immediate supervisor is usually a primary source of information about organizational policies, procedures, and expectations, and the organizational representative with whom employees usually have the most contact. In essence, the supervisor is the “face” of the organization for many employees. Downward hostility evokes the belief that the organization does not value the targeted subordinate’s contributions, which makes the target less likely to form an affective attachment to their employer (i.e., affective organizational commitment; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008). In addition, downward hostility constitutes a threat to subordinates’ well-being that manifests as psychological indications of distress such as
anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). The evidence to date would therefore suggest that downward hostility is negatively related to subordinates’ job satisfaction and affective commitment, and positively related to subordinates’ psychological distress. However, adopting a relational perspective on hostility in supervisor–subordinate relationships yields a fundamentally different question: *Does upward hostility influence the injurious effects of downward hostility on subordinates’ work-related attitudes and psychological well-being?* To answer this question, we drew from literatures that address (a) the conditions associated with the emergence of the victim identity, (b) negative rumination in response to one’s own displays of aggression, and (c) the escalating nature of hostility in work relationships.

*Upward Hostility as Self-Enhancing: A Victim Identity Perspective*

Identity refers to the way that people perceive and define themselves (Tajfel, 1978). A person’s identity is typically multifaceted, encompassing such things as beliefs about one’s competence, future aspirations, and values (Markus, 1977). Identity has been conceptualized as a self-schema, a mental structure through which people organize and manage the cognitive demands that rich bodies of self-knowledge impose (Kihlstrom, Beer, & Klein, 2003). The structure of identity is important because the way people see themselves influences their cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses (Leary & Tangney, 2003). It is because identity mediates thought, feeling, and action that considerable research attention has been devoted to elucidating the processes by which identity is constructed. This work suggests that much of the self-knowledge that comprises identity emerges from interactions with other people (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). That is, identity is informed by the treatment we receive from others as well as the ways we respond to that treatment. In work organizations, interactions with supervisory leaders supply much of the information that feeds into identity construction (Lord & Brown, 2004). Indeed, some theories of leadership effectiveness emphasize the leader’s role in shaping subordinates’ identity (see van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004, for a review).

What are the identity implications for subordinate targets of downward hostility? People ordinarily place high value on and take steps to experience positive identities (Schlenker, 1980; Swann, 1987; Tajfel, 1978). Being the target of interpersonal mistreatment constitutes what Aquino and Douglas (2003) refer to as an identity threat, “any overt action by another party that challenges, calls into question, or diminishes a person’s sense of competence, dignity, or self-worth” (p. 196). We propose that persistent exposure to hostility may evoke a victim identity, a negative
image of the self that is organized around the pervasive belief that one has been and will continue to be a helpless target of various forms of hostility. The victim identity may be distinguished from victimization, which refers to the perception that one has been exposed to hostile behaviors such as rudeness and physical intimidation, and victim characteristics, personal attributes that put individuals at risk of becoming the target of hostile acts. The differences among these constructs are illustrated in a series of studies on workplace victimization in which scholars have examined the relationships between perceived victimization and victim characteristics such as negative affectivity and conflict management style (see Aquino & Thau, 2009, for a review). No research has explicitly examined the emergence of the victim identity in the workplace. Instead, it is generally assumed that individuals see themselves as victims when they have been exposed to behaviors that fall within the victimization content domain. In studies of the victim identity in nonwork contexts, it has been suggested that individuals can come to see themselves as victims even in the absence of a genuine identity threat, but this is believed to be less common than is the emergence of victim self-perceptions in the wake of exposure to concrete identity threats (Dunn, 2010).

We conceptualize exposure to hostility (i.e., victimization) and the victim identity as distinct constructs and propose that not all targets of downward hostility will see themselves as victims. One way of achieving and maintaining a favorable self-image/avoiding a negative self-image is by aggressing against specific targets (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). In their pioneering work on self-presentation strategies that people employ in the pursuit of various impression management goals, Jones and Pittman (1982) theorize that there are situations in which people desire to appear tough and unwilling to be a quiet target of hostility. This impression management goal would seem to be relevant to targets of downward hostility because they run the risk of being perceived as weak, vulnerable, and a “ripe” target for further victimization (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). By performing acts of upward hostility, targets of downward hostility signal to themselves and to others that they are able and willing to defend themselves (Tripp et al., 2002). In essence, upward hostility should produce self-images that are incompatible with the victim identity.

Having avoided the victim identity, targets of downward hostility who perform acts of upward hostility should, in turn, experience less injury to their attitudes and well-being compared to targets of downward hostility who eschew upward hostility and who are therefore more likely to see themselves as victims. Nonvictims, compared to victims, should be more likely to believe that their needs are being met on the job, which should translate into higher levels of job satisfaction. Believing that they have been and will continue to be targets of interpersonal mistreatment by the
“face” of their organization (i.e., their immediate supervisor), victims will also experience little motivation to give back to their employer with high levels of commitment to the organization. Nonvictims should not feel as helpless and impotent as their victim counterparts; nonvictims should therefore experience less psychological distress.

What we are describing amounts to a buffering effect of upward hostility on the detrimental effects of downward hostility. To specify the precise form of the self-enhancement effect, identity threat should be lower when downward hostility is low and should increase as downward hostility increases from lower to higher levels. Because subordinates are more likely to experience a victim identity with increasing levels of downward hostility, their job satisfaction and affective commitment should decline and their psychological distress should increase as downward hostility increases. However, because performing acts of upward hostility reduces the likelihood that subordinates will experience a victim identity, the detrimental effects of downward hostility will be weaker as upward hostility increases.

**Hypothesis 1:** Upward hostility will weaken the negative relationships between downward hostility and subordinates’ job satisfaction (Hypothesis 1a) and affective commitment (Hypothesis 1b), and upward hostility will weaken the positive relationship between downward hostility and subordinates’ psychological distress (Hypothesis 1c).

**Upward Hostility as Self-Defeating: Negative Rumination and Escalating Hostility Perspectives**

The perspective that upward hostility is self-defeating for targets of downward hostility comes from two bodies of research, one of which suggests that punishing aggressors impairs (rather than improves) individual’s state affect (i.e., the negative rumination perspective) and one of which suggests that, over time, the intensity of mutual hostility may escalate (i.e., the escalating hostility perspective).

**Negative rumination.** According to the negative rumination perspective, people return the hostility of others because they believe that it will make them feel better, that hostility has cathartic value (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001). However, people often make errors when asked to predict their future affect (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003), and when it comes to predicting anger, there may be a bias toward underestimation (Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008). This is because people typically fail to appreciate the spiraling trajectory of angry thoughts. Anger dominates
other kinds of thoughts, making it more difficult to experience emotions other than increasingly intense anger (Bushman, 2002). Whereas those who punish offenders remain fixated on and unable to get beyond the precipitating event, those who withhold punishment against aggressive relational partners turn to strategies that make it easier to move on such as trivializing the aggression (i.e., construing the behavior as relatively unimportant and not worthy of deep consideration and sustained attention; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). Consistent with these arguments, experimental work suggests that punishing perpetrators does not repair the negative moods that interpersonal offenses engender. In a series of lab studies, Carsmith et al. (2008) found that subjects who punished offenders experienced greater negative affect compared to subjects who did not punish offenders. The authors reasoned and found support for the thesis that punishing increases negative rumination about the offender, which in turn evokes greater negative affect.

The self-defeating perspective proposed here extends prior theory and research to the context of actual supervisor–subordinate relationships. We theorize that upward hostility exacerbates the effect of downward hostility on negative rumination and that the negative rumination subordinates experience, in turn, has implications for their work-related attitudes and psychological well-being. Negative rumination involves a recurring pattern of negative self-talk that crowds out competing thoughts. Consequently, negative rumination about supervisors should make it difficult for subordinates to focus on any positive features of the job or organization, assuming that there are any positive features to appreciate. Unable to recognize any upside of their work, negative ruminating subordinates should be unlikely to form strong affective attachments to their job or to their employer (i.e., their job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment should be lower than those who experience lower levels of negative rumination).

Negative rumination also has psychobiological implications. Studies suggest that negative rumination is associated with the production of stress hormones (e.g., epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol), a process that is referred to as allostatics. When individuals experience sustained negative self-talk, the resulting cumulative effect of physiological activation or allostatic load can adversely impact mental and physical health (for a review of the process by which the overproduction of stress hormones compromises biological systems, see Kiecolt-Glaser, 1999). Consistent with these arguments, evidence suggests that stressful interpersonal relationships, particularly those in which the focal party harbors persistent anger, resentment, and bitterness toward their counterpart, are associated with increased allostatic load and damage to the focal person’s mental and
physical health (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000).

We should see evidence of the self-defeating perspective’s validity in an exacerbation effect of upward hostility on the relationships between downward hostility and subordinates’ job satisfaction, affective commitment, and psychological distress. To specify the form of the self-defeating effect, negative rumination should increase as downward hostility increases from lower to higher levels (across levels of upward hostility). Because subordinates are more likely to ruminate with increasing levels of downward hostility, their job satisfaction and affective commitment should decline and their psychological distress should increase as downward hostility increases. However, because performing acts of upward hostility increases the likelihood that subordinates will experience negative rumination, the detrimental effects of downward hostility will be stronger as upward hostility increases.

Escalating hostility. The notion that performing acts of upward hostility is self-defeating is also consistent with Andersson and Pearson’s (1999) theoretical work on the spiraling effects of workplace incivility. According to this perspective, expressions of mutual hostility may escalate from mild violations of norms for respect (i.e., incivility) to increasingly serious forms of aggression: “one person mocks another; the second responds with an obscene insult. The first shoves; the second hits. And the conflict escalates until one person is seriously wounded” (p. 458). Andersson and Pearson use the term spiral to refer to a steady escalation of intensity as relational partners reciprocate one another’s hostility. Parties to negative exchanges may escalate (rather than merely match their counterpart’s) hostility because of a tendency to overestimate the level of harm that their relational partner’s behavior has caused. This overestimation of the injury that targets experience “justifies” and triggers nonproportional responses. One person’s overreaction begets an overreaction from their relational partner, and an escalating spiral of hostility emerges.

Andersson and Pearson (1999) speculate that spirals that begin with incivility can culminate in physical forms of aggression, acts that are beyond the scope of our conceptual and empirical work. However, their central thesis is relevant to our examination of the exchange of nonphysical hostility between supervisors and subordinates. Essentially, targets of downward hostility who perform acts of upward hostility run the risk of experiencing increasingly intense later downward hostility. The increase in downward hostility evoked by higher levels of subordinate upward hostility, in turn, leads to lower levels of job satisfaction and affective commitment and higher levels of psychological distress. In this way, the escalating hostility perspective, like the negative rumination perspective, leads to the hypothesis that upward hostility is self-defeating.
**Hypothesis 2:** Upward hostility will strengthen the negative relationships between downward hostility and subordinates’ job satisfaction (Hypothesis 2a) and affective commitment (Hypothesis 2b); and upward hostility will strengthen the positive relationship between downward hostility and subordinates’ psychological distress (Hypothesis 2c).

**Study 1**

**Method**

Sample and procedure. We tested the hypotheses using data from a two-wave sample of supervised employees. The lag between the Time 1 and Time 2 survey administrations was 7 months. The Time 1 survey included measures of downward hostility, upward hostility, and a control variable, trait negative affectivity. The Time 2 survey included measures of the dependent variables: job satisfaction, affective commitment, and psychological distress (i.e., depression). The research design involved calling 1,356 randomly selected telephone numbers in a midwestern U.S. city. Applying the screening criteria of holding a full-time job and having a supervisor at work yielded 803 individuals who were eligible to participate. As incentive to participate, eligible individuals were informed that ten $100 prizes would be raffled off to those who completed the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys. Six hundred and eighteen eligible individuals agreed to participate in the study by completing and returning a survey questionnaire by mail. Postcard reminders were sent 1 week after participants received the survey. Three hundred and twenty-eight returned usable Time 1 surveys. Seven months later, we contacted those who completed the Time 1 survey and invited them to complete a second survey. We were able to contact 297 of the 328 Time 1 participants, 275 of whom agreed to participate in the follow-up survey. Two hundred thirty-seven returned usable surveys, 169 of whom had the same job and supervisor they had at Time 1. Our analyses were based on the data from these 169 people for whom we had usable data at two points in time. The sample was 54% women, the median age was between 35 and 49 years, and the participants were employed in the following industry categories: 43% services or retailing, 17% government, 16% manufacturing, 12% education, and 12% small business. These data suggested that the sample was representative of the city from it was drawn.

Measures

**Downward hostility.** Downward hostility was assessed at Time 1 using Tepper’s (2000) 15-item measure of abusive supervision. Illustrative items
read, “My supervisor ridicules me” and “My supervisor tells me that my thoughts and feelings are stupid,” and the respondents used a five-point response format to report how often their supervisor performed the behavior described in each item: \(1 = \text{I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me}\) to \(5 = \text{He/she uses this behavior very often with me}\).

**Upward hostility.** At Time 1, supervisor-directed hostility was assessed with Tepper et al.’s (2001) nine-item measure of dysfunctional resistance. Respondents reported how often they used the tactics described in each item when they resist their supervisors’ influence requests. Illustrative items are “I ignore my supervisor,” “I act like I don’t know about it,” and “I make a half-hearted effort then let my boss know that I could not do it.” The five-point response format ranged from \(1 = \text{I cannot remember ever using this tactic}\) to \(5 = \text{I use this tactic very often}\).

**Work attitudes.** At Time 2, participants completed two measures of work-related attitudes: the three-item measure of job satisfaction from Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh’s (1979) Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire and Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993) six-item measure of affective organizational commitment. Illustrative items read, “I am satisfied with my job” (job satisfaction) and “I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own” (affective commitment). The respondents rated their level of agreement with the work attitude items using a five-point response scale that ranged from \(1 = \text{strongly disagree}\) to \(5 = \text{strongly agree}\).

**Psychological distress.** The Time 2 survey also included a measure of psychological distress—the six-item depression scale from Derogatis’ (1993) Brief Symptom Inventory. Respondents used a five-point scale that ranged from \(1 = \text{never}\) to \(5 = \text{all the time}\) to report the extent to which the symptoms captured by each item had been bothering them during the previous 7 days. An illustrative item reads, “feeling no interest in things.”

**Negative affectivity.** It is conceivable that observed relationships between the predictors and the outcomes could be explained by negative affectivity, the trait tendency for individuals to see the world and themselves in a negative light. We measured negative affectivity at Time 1 using the appropriate 10 markers from Watson, Clark, and Tellegen’s (1988) Positive and Negative Affect Schedule. Respondents reported the extent to which they typically experience such emotions as “distressed,” “anxious,” and “afraid.” The five-point response scale ranged from \(1 = \text{you usually do not feel this way}\) to \(5 = \text{you usually feel this way}\).

**Bias Check**

We checked for bias by comparing the responses of two groups of participants: 159 who participated at Time 1 only and 169 who participated at
Time 1 and Time 2. Mean negative affectivity scores were higher for Time 1 only participants ($M = 1.99$) than for participants in both waves ($M = 1.81$; $F[1, 326] = 5.17, p < .05$), but there were no differences between the two groups on the measures of downward hostility ($F[1, 326] = .07$) or upward hostility ($F[1, 326] = .02$). We conducted an additional analysis to evaluate the possibility that, over time, those for whom upward hostility is self-defeating would quit or lose their jobs at a higher rate than might other participants. Such a bias would produce a sample that is underrepresented with individuals for whom upward hostility is self-defeating and, possibly, overrepresented with individuals for whom upward hostility is self-enhancing. We conducted a logistic regression analysis in which the categorical variable of group membership was regressed on negative affectivity, downward hostility, upward hostility, and the downward hostility × upward hostility interaction term. As a set, the predictors did not improve model fit above and beyond a null model: $\chi^2(4) = 6.83$, pseudo $R^2 = .03$, $ns$. Of the individual parameter estimates, only negative affectivity was significant. This suggests that the substantive predictors are unrelated to the odds of participants remaining in the sample and that the constitution of the sample is not biased for or against the self-defeating perspective.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and variable intercorrelations. The alpha internal-consistency reliability coefficients ranged from .78 (negative affectivity) to .95 (downward hostility). Downward hostility correlated positively with upward hostility, negative affectivity, and psychological distress and negatively with job satisfaction and affective commitment. Upward hostility correlated positively with negative affectivity but was unrelated to any of the Time 2 measures.

Hypothesis Tests

We tested the hypotheses by separately regressing the Time 2 measures of work attitudes and psychological distress on negative affectivity, downward hostility, upward hostility, and an interaction term consisting of the downward hostility × upward hostility cross-product. To facilitate the interpretation of significant interaction effects, we mean centered the predictors. The regression results are shown in Table 2. The variance explained by the regression equations were 15% for job satisfaction, 13% for affective commitment, and 16% for depression (all $p < .01$). Table 2 shows that the downward hostility × upward hostility interaction was significant in all three equations. A hierarchical regression analysis provides
TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>Time 1 measures</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Downward hostility</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2. Upward hostility</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>3. Negative affectivity</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.78</td>
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<td>Time 2 measures</td>
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<td>4. Job satisfaction</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Affective commitment</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Psychological Distress</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.83</td>
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Note. N = 169. Reliability estimates (coefficient alpha) are reported along the diagonal. *p < .05. ** p < .01.

TABLE 2
Moderated Regression Results in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th></th>
<th>Commitment</th>
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<th>Psychological Distress</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>β</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>3.34</td>
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<td>1.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative affectivity</td>
<td>-.48</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-.48</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward hostility</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upward hostility</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward hostility × Upward hostility</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
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</table>

R² | .15** | .13** | .16** |

Note. N = 169. Tabled values are unstandardized (b) and standardized regression coefficients (β). All predictors measured at Time 1 and all dependent variables measured at Time 2. *p < .05 **p < .01

some insight regarding the magnitude of the significant interactions. After accounting for all other effects, the incremental variance explained by the interaction term was 6% for job satisfaction (p < .01), 4% for affective commitment (p < .05), and 4% for psychological distress (p < .01).

We plotted the significant interactions and tested the significance of the simple slopes at +1 and −1 standard deviation on the moderator, upward hostility. Figure 1 shows graphical depictions of these interactions. Upward hostility weakened the relationship between downward hostility and each outcome variable. When upward hostility was low, downward hostility negatively predicted job satisfaction (b = −.43, p < .01) and affective commitment (b = −.21, p < .05), and positively predicted depression (b = .25, p < .01); when upward hostility was high, downward hostility was unrelated to the dependent variables: b = −.11 (ns) for job satisfaction, b = −.01 (ns) for affective commitment, and b = .10 (ns) for
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High Upward Hostility; $b = -.11$, n.s.  
Low Upward Hostility; $b = -.43$, $p < .01$

High Upward Hostility; $b = -.01$, n.s.  
Low Upward Hostility; $b = -.21$, $p < .05$

**Figure 1:** Graphical Depiction of the Significant Downward Hostility $\times$ Upward Hostility Interactions in Study 1.

depression. These results support the self-enhancing perspective (Hypothesis 1a, Hypothesis 1b, and Hypothesis 1c) and provide no support for the self-defeating perspective (Hypothesis 2a, Hypothesis 2b, and Hypothesis 2c).

**Summary and Transition to Study 2**

Although the results from Study 1 were consistent with the self-enhancing perspective, additional work seemed warranted in order to fully understand why upward hostility might have beneficial effects and whether there are limits to these benefits. The first goal for our second study was to explore the possibility that upward hostility may be self-defeating when looking at outcomes other than those that we accounted for in Study 1. For example, performing acts of upward hostility could damage the focal subordinate’s reputation with higher authorities who control valued resources such as promotion opportunities and desirable task assignments. Theories of reciprocity and exchange would predict that supervisors in
particular will not be inclined to advance the career interests of direct reports who perform acts of upward hostility (Blau, 1964). We may therefore observe evidence that upward hostility is self-defeating when we turn our attention to indicators of career satisfaction (i.e., contentment with the level of career success that the focal subordinate has achieved; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990) and career expectations (i.e., perceived career prospects; Scandura & Williams, 2004).

**Hypothesis 3**: Upward hostility will be negatively related to subordinates’ career satisfaction (Hypothesis 3a) and career expectations (Hypothesis 3b).

An important limitation of Study 1 is that we did not model the mechanism underlying the self-enhancement perspective. We therefore cannot conclude that the results emerged for the reasons specified by our theorizing. Our second goal for Study 2 was to directly examine that mechanism. We theorized that downward hostility evokes in subordinate targets a victim self-identity that, in turn, translates into unfavorable work attitudes and psychological distress. We further proposed that subordinates can avoid seeing themselves as a weak and vulnerable target (i.e., a victim identity) by performing acts of upward hostility. Taken together, these arguments suggest a moderated indirect effect framework in which the mediated effect of downward hostility on subordinates’ attitudes and psychological distress through victim identity is weaker when subordinates’ upward hostility is higher rather than lower. It is also conceivable that the self-enhancing effect of upward hostility observed in Study 1 generalizes to subjective career outcomes. Compared to subordinates who experience a victim identity, nonvictims should be more likely to believe that their career is progressing as they would hope and that their future career prospects are promising. That is, victim identity should mediate the relationships between downward hostility, and career satisfaction and career expectations. However, to the extent that upward hostility weakens the likelihood that targets of downward hostility will experience a victim identity, we would expect that the mediating effect of downward hostility on subjective career outcomes will be weaker as upward hostility increases.

**Hypothesis 4**: Upward hostility will weaken the negative indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by victim identity) on subordinates’ job satisfaction (4a) and affective commitment (4b); upward hostility will weaken the positive indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by victim identity) on subordinates’ psychological distress (4c); and upward hostility will
weaken the negative indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by victim identity) on subordinates’ career satisfaction (4d) and career expectations (4e).

It also seemed prudent to examine the mechanisms underlying the self-defeating model. It is conceivable that there is validity to the self-defeating model even though the effects observed in Study 1 suggest otherwise. This could occur if upward hostility is both self-enhancing and self-defeating, but the self-enhancing effect is considerably stronger than the self-defeating effect. In essence, the self-enhancing effect may have “swamped” the self-defeating effect. In order to examine this possibility, we used Study 2 to also examine the psychological processes underlying the self-defeating model. According to the self-defeating model, upward hostility should influence attitudinal and psychological health outcomes through negative rumination about the supervisor and/or later downward hostility, and the strength of these mediated effects should be stronger when upward hostility is higher rather than lower. Further, the negative rumination and increases in downward hostility that flows from the self-defeating model may have implications for targets’ subjective career perceptions. That is, the self-defeating effect may play out in a moderated indirect effect linking downward hostility and perceptions of career success and future prospects.

**Hypothesis 5:** Upward hostility will strengthen the negative indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by negative rumination) on subordinates’ job satisfaction (5a) and affective commitment (5b); upward hostility will strengthen the positive indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by negative rumination) on subordinates’ psychological distress (5c); and upward hostility will strengthen the negative indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by negative rumination) on subordinates’ career satisfaction (5d) and career expectations (5e).

**Hypothesis 6:** Upward hostility will strengthen the negative indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by later downward hostility) on subordinates’ job satisfaction (Hypothesis 6a) and affective commitment (Hypothesis 6b); upward hostility will strengthen the positive indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by later downward hostility) on subordinates’ psychological distress (Hypothesis 6c); and upward hostility will
strengthen the negative indirect effects of downward hostility (as mediated by later downward hostility) on subordinates’ career satisfaction (Hypothesis 6d) and career expectations (Hypothesis 6e).

Study 2

Method

Samples and procedures. We tested Hypotheses 3, 4, 5, and 6 using a three-wave design with individuals who held full-time jobs and were supervised at work. A lag of 3 weeks separated the first and second survey administrations and the second and third survey administrations. The Time 1 survey contained measures of downward hostility and upward hostility and a control variable, negative affectivity; the Time 2 survey contained measures of the mechanisms underlying the self-enhancing effect (i.e., victim identity) and the self-defeating effect (i.e., negative rumination & downward hostility); and the Time 3 survey contained the measures of job satisfaction, affective commitment, psychological distress, and subjective career outcomes.

The sample was drawn from ZoomPanel, a research panel administered by SurveyMonkey. At the time of the study, approximately 2,000,000 people were enrolled in the panel. In exchange for completing online surveys, panelists receive points that can be redeemed for such things as music downloads, tickets for movies, electronics, and DVDs. Our desired sample size after three waves of data collection was 300 employed and supervised study participants. In order to yield a final sample of that size, we needed at least 850 completed responses to Time 1. An invitation to participate was sent to approximately 17,000 panelists and after a sufficient number completed the survey, approximately 24 hours later, the link was disabled. For the first wave, 1,085 followed the link to the consent form, 883 of whom fit the eligibility criteria (i.e., employed adult and supervised at work) and consented to participate. Those who completed the Time 1 survey were invited to complete the Time 2 survey 3 weeks later. Five hundred and twelve participants who had the same supervisor completed the Time 2 survey. Participants who completed the Time 2 survey were sent an invitation to complete the Time 3 survey. Three hundred and seventy-one participants who had the same supervisor completed the Time 3 survey. The participants’ data from each wave were matched using ZoomPanel IDs.

The sample was 49% women, 81% employed full time; the average age was 43 years, and they were employed in the following job categories: 17% administration/clerical/secretarial, 13% sales/marketing/communications/customer service, 10% education, 8% information
technology, 5% finance/accounting/tax/risk management, 5% engineering, 4% production, and the rest were employed in jobs involving building services/maintenance, security, corporate management/legal, internal consulting, human resource management, purchasing logistics, and research/design. Forty-two percent of the respondents’ supervisors were women, and their average age was 47 years. Tenure working with the supervisor averaged 5.9 years.

Measures

*Time 1:* At Time 1, the participants completed the same measures of negative affectivity, downward hostility, and upward hostility that we employed in Study 1.

*Time 2:* At Time 2, participants completed measures that capture the mechanisms underlying the self-enhancing effect and the self-defeating effect. As we reported earlier, no research has examined victim identity and there were no validated measures of the construct that we could adapt for our studies. We therefore constructed a new measure of victim identity following the scale development procedures described by Hinkin (1998). First, we wrote five items that are consistent with the definition of victim identity: “the extent to which a person sees themself as a victim in the relationship with their immediate supervisor.” Second, we assessed the items’ content validity by asking 98 undergraduate students to assess how well the items correspond with the definition of victim identity (1 = a very poor match, 2 = a poor match, 3 = neither a poor nor good match, 4 = a good match, and 5 = a very good match). We retained three items that had average ratings of 4 or higher on the five-point scale—items that were, on average at least a “good” match to the definition. These items read, “When I think of how my boss treats me, I believe that I am a ‘victim’,” “I believe that my boss has ‘victimized’ me,” and “I think of myself as ‘victimized’ by my boss.”

The third step involved examining the new items’ factor structure, internal-consistency and test–retest reliability, and relationships between victim identity and other constructs that should be a part of its nomological net. Based on the arguments presented earlier, we theorized that a victim identity should be incompatible with the perceptions that one (a) has been treated fairly by their supervisor interpersonally (i.e., interpersonal justice), (b) has power to influence their supervisor (i.e., self-perceived power), and (c) is worthy and capable in the workplace (i.e., organization-based self-esteem [OBSE]). We developed and administered two surveys to 155 undergraduates who worked at least 30 hours per week in jobs that involved reporting to an immediate supervisor. The surveys were completed 2 to 3 weeks apart and the students received course credit
for participating. Both surveys included the new victim identity items and the Time 2 survey included Colquitt’s (2001) four-item measure of interpersonal justice; Anderson and Galinsky’s (2006) eight-item measure of self-perceived power; and Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, and Dunham’s (1989) 10-item measure of OBSE. For all items, we employed a seven-point response format that ranged from 1 = very strongly disagree to 7 = very strongly agree.

We separately assessed the factor structure of the Time 1 and Time 2 victim identity items in models that included the Time 2 justice, power, and OBSE items. A four-factor model that included the Time 1 victim identity items and the Time 2 measures of interactional justice, self-perceived power, and OBSE fit achieved a marginal fit to the data: (Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .86, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .10). Similar results emerged for the analyses involving the victim identity items from Time 2: (CFI = .85, RMSEA = .11). Careful scrutiny of the modification indices suggested no problems with the victim identity items. The primary sources of model misfit were the error terms associated with some of the self-perceived power and OBSE items. Freeing these error terms to covary produced well-fitting, four-factor models for the analyses involving Time 1 victim identity (CFI = .93, RMSEA = .07) and for the analyses involving Time 2 victim identity (CFI = .93, RMSEA = .08). Moreover, the four-factor model fit the data better than a one-factor model in which all items loaded on the same factor (for the analyses involving Time 1 victim identity, \( \Delta \chi^2 [6] = 1216, CFI = .58, \text{RMSEA} = .18 \); for Time 2 victim identity, \( \Delta \chi^2 [6] = 987, CFI = .63, \text{RMSEA} = .17 \)).

We further assessed the items’ discriminant validity following the procedures described by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The average variance extracted for the Time 1 and Time 2 victim identity items exceeded the amount of measurement error and also exceeded the respective squared correlations between victim identity and the other three constructs. Time 1 and Time 2 victim identity correlated –.44 and –.47 with interactional justice, –.47 and –.54 with self-perceived power, and –.29 and –.41 with
OBSE, respectively (all \( p < .01 \)). The alpha internal reliability coefficients for victim identity were .98 at Time 1 and at Time 2, and the lagged correlation was .62 (\( p < .01 \)), suggesting that over a relatively short time interval, victim identity scores were relatively stable. In general, the pilot data provided good preliminary evidence of the new items’ construct validity.

We measured negative rumination at Time 2 using Thau and Mitchell’s (2010) seven-item measure of intrusive thoughts about the supervisor. Illustrative items read, “I thought about my supervisor’s behavior when I didn’t mean to” and “Pictures about my supervisor’s behavior popped into my mind.” Respondents used a four-point response scale to report how often they experienced the thoughts described in each item (1 = not at all; 4 = often). The Time 2 survey also included the measure of downward hostility that participants completed at Time 1.

**Time 3:** At Time 3, the participants completed the same measures of job satisfaction, affective commitment, and depression that we used in Study 1. The Time 3 survey also included two measures of subjective career outcomes: Seibert, Kraimer, Holtom, and Pierotti’s (2013) 12-item measure of career satisfaction and a six-item measure of career expectations used by Scandura and Williams (2004). The career satisfaction items employ a five-point response format (1 = very unsatisfied to 5 = very satisfied) to rate satisfaction levels with 12 aspects of one’s career (e.g., “the progress you have made toward meeting your income goals,” “the rank or level to which you have been promoted,” and “the ability you have to choose the types of jobs you are interested in”). The career expectation items use a five-point response format (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to report agreement with such items as, “I expect to be promoted within my organization.”

**Bias Check**

We checked for bias by comparing the responses of three groups of participants: 387 who participated at Time 1 only, 125 who participated at Time 1 and Time 2 but not Time 3, and 371 who provided usable data at all three time periods. These groups did not differ on the measures of negative affectivity (\( F[2, 880] = 1.62 \)), downward hostility (\( F[2, 880] = 3.09 \)), or upward hostility (\( F[2, 880] = 2.36 \)). Next, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression analysis in which the categorical variable of group membership was regressed on negative affectivity, downward hostility, upward hostility, and downward hostility \( \times \) upward hostility interaction term. As a set, the predictors did not improve model fit above and beyond a null model: \( \chi^2(8) = 11.35 \), pseudo \( R^2 = .01 \), ns. None of the individual parameter estimates were significant either. As was the case with Study 1,
the predictors were unrelated to the odds of participants remaining in the sample, and there was no evidence that the sample was underrepresented with individuals for whom upward hostility is self-defeating.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the variables in Study 2. The alpha internal-consistency reliability coefficients ranged from .83 (career expectations) to .96 (Time 1 downward hostility). Time 1 downward hostility correlated positively with all other constructs measured at Time 1 and Time 2, as well as Time 3 depression, and negatively with job satisfaction, affective commitment, and career satisfaction.

Hypothesis Tests

To test the moderated indirect effect hypotheses (Hypothesis 4, Hypothesis 5, & Hypothesis 6), we employed the procedures for analyzing first-stage moderation models described by Edwards and Lambert (2007). This involved regressing the mediators, victim identity, negative rumination, and Time 2 downward hostility on negative affectivity, Time 1 downward hostility and upward hostility, and an interaction term consisting of the Time 1 downward hostility \( \times \) upward hostility cross-product (i.e., the first stage). We then regressed the criterion variables (job satisfaction, affective commitment, depression, career satisfaction, and career expectations) on negative affectivity, Time 1 downward hostility, upward hostility, victim identity, negative rumination, and Time 2 downward hostility (i.e., the second stage). We used the information from the first- and second-stage equations to calculate the indirect effects of Time 1 downward hostility on the outcomes (through victim identity, negative rumination, and Time 2 downward hostility) at higher and lower levels of upward hostility. For all analyses, we used the estimates from 1,000 bootstrapped samples to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals (Shrout & Bolger, 2002).

Tables 4 and 5 show the path estimates for the first stage and for the second stage, respectively. We first tested Hypotheses 3a and 3b, that upward hostility would be negatively related to career satisfaction and career expectations, respectively. As shown in the last two columns of Table 5, upward hostility was a significant predictor of both career satisfaction and career expectations. However, the sign on the corresponding regression weights was positive: \( b = .26, p < .01 \), for career satisfaction and \( b = .31, p < .01 \), for career expectations. This means that as upward
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time 1 measures</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Downward hostility</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>(.96)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Upward hostility</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>(.93)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Negative affectivity</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>(.93)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Victim identity</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Negative rumination</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Downward hostility</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>(.95)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3 measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Job satisfaction</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>(.96)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Affective commitment</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Psychological Distress</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>(.93)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Career satisfaction</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>.68**</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>(.93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Career expectations</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>(.83)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 371. Reliability estimates (coefficient alpha) are reported along the diagonals.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
TABLE 4
First Stage Path-Analytic Regression Results in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Victim identity</th>
<th>Negative rumination</th>
<th>Downward hostility (T2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>( \beta )</td>
<td>( b )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affectivity</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.11∗</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward hostility (T1)</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.43∗∗</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upward hostility</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.20∗∗</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward hostility (T1) × Upward hostility</td>
<td>−.33</td>
<td>−.34∗∗</td>
<td>−.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( R^2 \) | .22∗∗ | .34∗∗ | .53∗∗ |

Note. \( N = 371 \). Tabled values are unstandardized (\( b \)) and standardized regression coefficients (\( \beta \)).

∗\( p < .05 \). ∗∗\( p < .01 \).

hostility increases, career satisfaction and career expectations also increase. Hypotheses 3a and 3b were not supported.

Turning to the tests of moderated indirect effects, the first two columns of Table 4 show that a first-stage model including negative affectivity, Time 1 downward hostility, upward hostility, and the Time 1 downward hostility \( \times \) upward hostility interaction term explained 22% (\( p < .01 \)) of the variance in victim identity, 34% (\( p < .01 \)) of the variance in negative rumination, and 53% of the variance in Time 2 downward hostility. In all three models, the Time 1 downward hostility \( \times \) upward hostility interaction term was a significant predictor (for victim identity, \( b = −.33, ΔR^2 = .07, p < .01 \); for negative rumination, \( b = −.14, ΔR^2 = .03, p < .01 \); for Time 2 downward hostility, \( b = −.27, ΔR^2 = .07, p < .01 \)). The second stage results reported in Table 5 shows that the model including negative affectivity, Time 1 downward hostility, upward hostility, victim identity, negative rumination, and Time 2 downward hostility explained significant variance in job satisfaction (14%), affective commitment (19%), psychological distress (44%), career satisfaction (16%), and career expectations (11%; all \( p < .01 \)). Inspection of the regression weights shows that victim identity was positively related to psychological distress and negatively related to all other outcomes; negative rumination and Time 2 downward hostility were positively related to psychological distress and unrelated to all other outcomes.

We used the information from these equations to calculate the indirect effects of Time 1 downward hostility on the outcome variables through victim identity, negative rumination, and Time 2 downward hostility. Table 6 presents these effects (\( ρ \) values). Hypothesis 4 predicted that when upward hostility is lower, Time 1 downward hostility will have stronger
## TABLE 5
Second Stage Path-Analytic Regression Results in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Affective commitment</th>
<th>Psychological Distress</th>
<th>Career satisfaction</th>
<th>Career expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affectivity</td>
<td>−.24</td>
<td>−.19**</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.12*</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward hostility (T1)</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upward hostility</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>−.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim identity</td>
<td>−.26</td>
<td>−.29**</td>
<td>−.36</td>
<td>−.40**</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative rumination</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downward hostility (T2)</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 371. Tabled values unstandardized (b) and standardized regression coefficients (β).

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Table 6

**Indirect Effects of Time 1 Downward Hostility on Outcomes at High and Low Levels of Upward Hostility**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Affective commitment</th>
<th>Psychological Distress</th>
<th>Career satisfaction</th>
<th>Career expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Via victim identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High upward hostility</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.09**</td>
<td>-.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low upward hostility</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**</td>
<td>ρ difference</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.04*</td>
<td>.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Via negative rumination</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High upward hostility</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low upward hostility</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Via T2 downward hostility</strong></td>
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<td>High upward hostility</td>
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<td>Low upward hostility</td>
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*Note. N = 371. Table values are indirect effect estimates (ρ).  
* * p < .05. ** p < .01.*
indirect effects (through victim identity) on subordinates’ job satisfaction (Hypothesis 4a), affective commitment (Hypothesis 4b), psychological distress (Hypothesis 4c), career satisfaction (Hypothesis 4d), and career expectations (Hypothesis 4e). As shown in Table 6 and illustrated in Figure 2, downward hostility had significant indirect effects on all outcome variables but psychological distress. In each case, however, these indirect effects were stronger when upward hostility was lower rather than higher: $\rho$ difference = .12, $p < .01$, for job satisfaction; $\rho$ difference = .18, $p < .01$, for affective commitment; $\rho$ difference = .04, $p < .05$, for psychological distress; $\rho$ difference = .10, $p < .01$, for career satisfaction; and $\rho$ difference = .06, $p < .01$, for career expectations. Hypotheses 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, and 4e were supported.

Hypotheses 5 and 6 predicted that the indirect effects of Time 1 downward hostility through negative rumination and Time 2 downward hostility, respectively, would be stronger at higher rather than lower levels of upward hostility. Table 6 shows that evidence of moderated indirect effects through negative rumination and Time 2 downward hostility were observed for one outcome variable: psychological distress. As illustrated in Figure 3, the indirect effects of Time 1 downward hostility on depression were stronger when upward hostility was lower rather than higher: for negative rumination, $\rho$ difference = .04, $p < .05$; for Time 2 downward hostility, $\rho$ difference = .12, $p < .01$. Hypotheses 5 and 6 were not supported. Indeed, with respect to one dependent variable, psychological distress, the evidence suggests that upward hostility is self-enhancing rather than self-defeating.

General Discussion

Although considerable progress has been made in examining hostile behavior of supervisors toward subordinates and of subordinates toward supervisors, important gaps remain. We attempted to take the next step in this research domain by examining whether performing acts of upward hostility is self-enhancing or self-defeating for subordinates whose supervisors perform acts of downward hostility. The self-enhancing model, which is rooted in identity theory, suggests that in relationships involving higher levels of downward hostility performing acts of upward hostility is self-enhancing. In contrast, the self-defeating model, which is informed by theory and research on negative rumination and escalating patterns of hostility, suggests that performing acts of upward hostility is detrimental to subordinates. The results of our first study provided support for predictions that are consistent with the self-enhancing model but not the self-defeating model. Specifically, we found that upward hostility weakened the detrimental effects of downward hostility on subordinates’ job satisfaction, affective commitment, and psychological distress. For
Figure 2: Graphical Depiction of Moderated Indirect Effects Through Victim Identity on Outcomes in Study 2.
all the interaction effects that emerged in Study 1, downward hostility was unrelated to the outcomes when upward hostility was high. The form of the interactions further suggested that, in relationships involving downward hostility, performing acts of upward hostility was associated with more favorable outcomes compared to when subordinates did not perform acts of upward hostility.

Our second study examined the mechanisms behind the self-enhancing and self-defeating effects of upward hostility and expanded the analysis to include indications of subjective career outcomes. In a three-wave sample, we found that victim identity explained the effects of downward hostility on work attitudes and psychological distress, and that these effects were stronger when upward hostility was lower. We also found that upward hostility was positively related to career satisfaction and career expectations, and that the indirect effects of downward hostility on career outcomes through victim identity were stronger when upward hostility was lower. These findings suggest that it is the avoidance of victim self-perceptions that explains why upward hostility buffers the effects of downward hostility on attitudinal, psychological health, and subjective career outcomes.

Theoretical Implications

Our primary contribution lies in shedding light on conflicting perspectives regarding the efficacy of performing acts of upward hostility. Relevant theory suggests that expressing hostility against hostile supervisors has benefits (i.e., avoidance of victim self-perceptions) and costs (i.e., persistent negative rumination about the supervisor and his/her behavior and escalation of downward hostility) that are reflected in subordinates’
attitudes and psychological well-being. Our strong inference studies take a step toward reconciling these conflicting perspectives by showing that in relationships involving downward hostility and the amount of upward hostility subordinates perform matters, and that, at least with respect to the outcomes we examined, subordinates fare better when they perform acts of upward hostility.

Our research brings a fresh perspective to the study of hostility between supervisors and subordinates. The scholarly research to date has focused on whether subordinates choose to reciprocate or not reciprocate supervisory hostility (e.g., Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007, 2012; Tepper et al., 2009; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). From these studies, researchers have drawn inferences regarding the efficacy of reciprocating downward hostility. For example, based on a series of studies suggesting that self-resource drain mediates the relationship between downward hostility and upward hostility, Thau and Mitchell (2010) concluded that the inability to maintain self-regulatory abilities rather than self-gain explains supervisor-directed hostility. However, Thau and Mitchell did not directly examine whether subordinates get anything out of performing acts of upward hostility. We have argued that examining the efficacy of upward hostility requires a paradigmatic shift away from a focus on the relationship between downward hostility and upward hostility and toward a focus on the interactive effects of downward and upward hostility. We employed this approach to illuminate the consequences of being involved in relationships that vary in terms of downward and upward hostility.

We set out to test opposing arguments regarding the efficacy of upward hostility, and the results naturally raise questions about the model that was not supported: the self-defeating model. In describing the theoretical bases for the self-defeating model, we invoked theory and research suggesting that punishing aggressors evokes negative rumination and escalates the aggressors’ subsequent hostility. However, the evidence regarding negative rumination and changes in downward hostility provided some support for the self-enhancing perspective and no support for the self-defeating perspective. Clues as to why the self-defeating perspective was not supported come from recent work suggesting that for a focal person forgiving, rather than punishing, aggressors may be detrimental. Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, and Kumashiro (2010) found that withholding punishment toward aggressors enhances the target’s self-respect only when the aggressor subsequently acts in a manner suggesting that the target will be a valued relational partner and safe from further aggression (i.e., the aggressor makes amends). When the aggressor shows little evidence of remorse, withholding punishment against aggressors (i.e., forgiving) diminishes the target’s self-respect, a phenomenon that Luchies et al. refer to as the
“doormat effect.” Of course, in our studies we did not assess whether the targets of downward hostility perceived their supervisors to be remorseful. But to the extent that hostile supervisors are perceived to be unrepentant, there may be few benefits (in terms of attitudes, well-being, and subjective career success) to subordinates for withholding upward hostility.

The evidence from Study 2 suggesting that upward hostility and subjective career outcomes are positively related (rather than negatively related as was hypothesized) also warrants some discussion. One explanation for these relationships is that employees who have achieved/expect to achieve a certain level of career success also have the track record and confidence to execute acts of upward hostility. Less successful employees may be less likely to believe that they can get away with upward hostility or that such behavior will be instrumental in achieving personal goals. It is also conceivable that the relationship between upward hostility and subjective career success may be explained by third variables such as proactivity, the dispositional tendency to take initiative in order to create desired work conditions (rather than waiting passively for things to develop; Crant, 2000). Proactive individuals may be more likely to perform acts of upward hostility and to engage in behaviors that position them for career success (e.g., feedback seeking). These explanations are, of course, only speculative. Whether the effects we observed may be attributed to reverse causality, third variables, or other factors, it seems clear that the relationship between upward hostility and career success is not as straightforward as our self-defeating theorizing suggests.

Practical Implications

The results of our research highlight the practical benefits that are derived when employees do not experience a victim identity. Given the results from our second study, which revealed links between victim identity and attitudes toward work and career and psychological well-being, it would appear to be in the best interests of organizational members to avoid a victim identity. Employers also stand to benefit when employees do not see themselves as victims given the considerable body of empirical evidence suggesting that satisfied, committed, psychologically healthy employees are less costly to organizations in terms of absenteeism and quit rates and healthcare costs (Ashforth, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986; Zapf, Dormann, & Frese, 1996).

To prevent employees from experiencing a victim identity, organizations should make every effort to reduce the occurrence of downward hostility, which was revealed to be a serious identity threat in our second study. In prior research, scholars have advocated a zero-tolerance policy with regard to downward hostility (Tepper et al., 2006; Thau & Mitchell,
2010), and we echo that recommendation here. We also encourage efforts to imbue in employees psychological states that would appear to be incompatible with the victim identity. The evidence from our pilot work suggests that targeting employees’ perceptions of justice and self-efficacy may be helpful in that regard. There may also be value in biasing the selection process away from individuals who are higher in trait negative affectivity, which was also associated with victim identity in our second study. Before closing this section, we note that these recommendations come with a warning. Our work suggests that employees have a personally effective method of avoiding a victim identity—performing acts of upward hostility. Although upward hostility may be personally beneficial, there is evidence to suggest that these acts can be detrimental to organization functioning (Detert, Trevino, Burris, & Andiappan, 2007; Dunlop & Lee, 2004). Hostility of any type (whether downward or upward) can create a culture that fosters hostile and aggressive interactions among employees (cf. Andersson & Pearson, 1999), and these types of interactions can impair interpersonal dynamics among employees that are essential for effective organizational functioning. Consequently, organizations should work proactively to avoid creating the circumstances that put individual identity at risk and strive to promote respectful interactions among employees.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

We must acknowledge several limitations of our studies that should be addressed in future research. One limitation is that we did not assess the temporal ordering of upward and downward hostility. As a consequence, we cannot examine the possibility that subordinate responses vary depending on whether upward hostility is a reaction to or cause of downward hostility. Our approach is in keeping with the conceptualization of downward and upward hostility as phenomena that co-occur within the context of ongoing supervisor–subordinate relationships (Klaussner, 2014; Tepper & Almeda, 2012). In essence, our concern is not with “who started it” but with the downstream consequences of involvement in relationships that stabilize around identifiable behavioral patterns (i.e., relational configurations involving mutual hostility, unilateral hostility, and nonhostility). Recent empirical evidence provides support for the notion that as supervisor–subordinate relationships mature, the relationship between downward hostility and upward hostility is reciprocal—that is, there is a blurring of hostile action and reaction (Lian, Ferris, Morrison, & Brown, 2014). This, of course, raises concerns about the validity of studies that have positioned downward hostility as a precursor of upward hostility. The relational approach that we employed, which makes no a priori assumptions about the causal sequencing of downward and upward hostility, would appear to have better fidelity with what we now know.
A second limitation is that our reliance on correlational research designs places limits on the confidence with which we can draw causal inferences. To assuage this concern, we employed lagged designs in both studies, which allowed us to examine the hypothesized relationships over time. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the variables that we treated as “outcomes” were causes rather than consequences of our presumed “antecedents,” or that variance in the outcomes we examined (e.g., satisfaction with job and career) may be explained by factors that predate the relationship with the referent supervisor. Longitudinal research designs, in which all variables are measured at multiple points in time, will be needed to shed further light on the causal sequencing of hostility, victim identity, and attitudinal, well-being, and career outcomes. These designs could be used to examine how relationships with previous supervisors affect the development of, and reactions to, relationships with subsequent supervisors. Longitudinal research would also be ideal for examining the precursors of hostility in supervisor–subordinate relationships. The value of the relational perspective is not limited to examining the consequences of mutual hostility. Conceptualizing negative exchange as a relational phenomenon provides a useful perspective for exploring the conditions associated with the emergence of relationships involving nonhostility, unilateral hostility, and mutual hostility. Such research would improve our understanding of the factors that predict relational improvement and deterioration.

Our research introduced the concept of victim identity. Although the results of our scale development work and model testing in Study 2 provide preliminary evidence of the construct’s validity, additional study of victim identity is warranted. Future research should explore the in-role, extra-role, and counterproductive performance consequences of victim identity, as well as the factors that influence when exposure to hostility produces a victim identity or perceptions that may be incompatible with a victim identity (e.g., “my boss is crazy”). We would also encourage examination of the possibility that the victim identity has stable features that emerge across situations. Some individuals may carry a dispositional inclination to believe that they are victims. This possibility is certainly supported by the finding in our second study of a moderately strong relationship between negative affectivity and victim identity.

A final limitation has to do with the scope of our theorizing and empirical work. On the plus side, our work constitutes the first attempt to explore how upward hostility influences subordinate responses to downward hostility. On the negative side, we were not able to examine more complex models that could reveal conditions under which upward hostility is less self-enhancing if not self-defeating. Moderators that could be explored in future research include trait empathy, the dispositional inclination to
experience the feelings of others, and trait agreeableness, the trait tendency to behave in ways suggesting cooperativeness, warmth, and trust toward others. It is conceivable that high empathy or highly agreeable individuals will experience guilt and shame in the wake of performing injurious acts and that they will therefore find upward hostility to be self-defeating. Another way of complicating the work that we have reported would be to consider varying time horizons and to further expand the domain of outcome variables to include indicators of reputation. Prior work suggests that targets of aggressive behavior are held in higher esteem by third parties when they retaliate in a measured way—matching the magnitude and intensity of the aggressor’s hostility—rather than ignoring or escalating the aggressor’s hostility (Tripp et al., 2002). It seems likely that supervisors may not be as generous in their long-term evaluations of, or willingness to act kindly toward, perpetrators of upward hostility (e.g., writing a favorable letter of recommendation). We must also acknowledge that although our results provide evidence that upward hostility is self-enhancing, we cannot conclude that upward hostility is the most efficacious way of coping with downward hostility. Targets of downward hostility would appear to have many alternatives to upward hostility, including acceptance and forgiveness of the supervisor and forging strong network ties with other organizational members. Research that compares the efficacy of the many coping options that are available to targets of downward hostility should put what we have found into better perspective.

Conclusion

It is an unfortunate fact of organizational life that some employees become targets of downward hostility. Although the base rate of downward hostility is low, its effects can be quite damaging. Our findings suggest that subordinates’ upward hostility has implications for their work attitudes, psychological well-being, and subjective career outcomes. Specifically, upward hostility can buffer the injurious effects of downward hostility by reducing the likelihood that subordinates will see themselves as victims. These findings suggest new and important directions for future research and have implications for the management of negative work behavior.

REFERENCES


