Co-workers' Social Undermining Behaviour, Trust in Co-workers and Employees' Work Behaviours

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Abstract

This study examines the extent to which trust in co-workers mediates the relationships between co-workers' social undermining behavior and employees' work behaviors. The mediating role was investigated using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) from 502 employees in Malaysia. The SEM analysis showed that co-workers' social undermining behavior had indirect relationships with employees' work behaviors via the mediating role of trust in co-workers. The results of this study highlighted the importance of curbing social undermining behavior in the workplace in order to instill trust among employees and better work behaviors in the workplace.

Keywords: social undermining behavior; trust in co-workers; organizational citizenship behavior; counter-productive work behavior; Malaysia

1. Introduction

The importance of trust in co-workers is magnified by the prevalence of teamwork and task interdependence in organizations (Lau &Liden, 2008). As employees and their co-workers have equal power, trust is considered as the hallmark of effective relationships among them. Trust is important because it is a precursor to quality social exchange relationships and it could contribute towards improving the performance of employees (Dirks &Skarlicki, 2009; Ferres, Connell, &Travaglione, 2004). Trust can affect the amount and accuracy of information sharing in a social network (Droege, Anderson & Bowler, 2003). Employees feel more comfortable to exchange information and knowledge with their co-workers when they have positive expectations of how the co-workers will utilize the information (Jones & George, 1998). Trust in co-workers is essential because employees work with others to successfully accomplish relevant tasks and shared goals. According to Parker, Williams, and Turner (2006), individuals who trust their co-workers are more likely to feel more in control on their work outcomes and they have higher affective commitment.

Scholars have devoted much effort to uncover the antecedents of trust.

Traditionally, their work focused mainly on perceived trustworthiness. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) posited that the trustworthiness of trustees comprises attributes such as their ability, benevolence, and integrity. Past research on trust has demonstrated that the three attributes contribute to the prediction of trust (Kiffin-Petersen&Cordery, 2003; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Tan & Tan, 2000). Tan and Lim (2009), using full-time agents of a life insurance company in Singapore as samples, revealed that co-workers' benevolence and integrity factors were significantly and positively related to trust in co-workers. This study extends Tan and Lim's work by examining co-workers' social undermining behavior as antecedent of trust in co-workers. The aim of the current study is to show that co-workers' social undermining behavior has an indirect impact on work behaviors through trust in co-workers. It is expected that when employees do not perceive themselves as the target for co-workers' social undermining behavior, they would trust more in co-workers, and thereby perform more organizational citizenship behavior and commit less counter-productive behavior.

1.1 Social undermining behavior and trust in co-workers

Negative events in an organization can be critical in undermining trust (Mishra, 1996). Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002) regarded the experience of being the target of social undermining behavior as a negative event. They defined social undermining as a form of negative behavior that is, '...intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation' (Duffy *et al.*, 2002; 332). Examples of social undermining behavior in the workplace include delaying work to make others look bad and hurting the feelings of others.

Morrison and Robinson (1997) perceived undermining behavior as a violation of the relational contract and suggested that it may lead to serious individual and organizational consequences. Social undermining behavior of co-workers could lead to workplace conflict as people are likely to respond to negative behavior by retaliating with similar behavior (Andersson& Pearson, 1999). Lau and Cobb (2010) suggested that relationship conflict between co-workers may adversely affect employees' trust for one another. Given that relationship conflicts often involve negative behavior (Ilies, Johnson, Judge, & Keeney,2011), it is anticipated that co-workers' social undermining behavior would diminish trust in co-workers.

Although trust can be examined at multiple levels such as at the individual (e.g., supervisors, teammates, and co-workers), organizational, inter-organizational, and international levels, the present study focuses on trust in co-workers. Tan and Lim (2009) adapted Mayer *et al.*'s (1995) definition of trust and defined trust in co-workers as, '...the willingness of a person to be vulnerable to the actions of fellow co-workers whose behavior and actions that person cannot control' (p. 46). Co-workers may be the employee's team members, but not necessarily so. The term 'co-workers' in this study encompasses employees who work in the same department and report to the same boss; they do not necessarily belong to the same team.

The relationships between employees and their co-workers entail equality matching (Fiske, 1992). According to Fiske, if an individual provides emotional and behavioral resources to another party, the individual expects that the other party would return a similar and relatively equal amount of resource in the future, even with an unspecified obligation. This shows that interactions between employees and their co-workers are based on reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Since there is no guarantee of reciprocation, trust is therefore central to exchanges between employees and their co-workers.

1.2 Organizational citizenship behavior and counter-productive work behaviour

The importance of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and counter-productive work behavior (CWB) is widely recognized in more recent research literature (e.g., Johnson, Tolentino, Rodopman, & Cho, 2010; Le *et al.*, 2011). OCB refers to employees' extra role behavior that improves the functioning of an organization (Organ & Paine, 1999). CWB, on the other hand, denotes voluntary acts by an employee that harms, or at least intended to harm, the legitimate interests of an organization and/or its members (Sackett&DeVore, 2002). Both OCB and CWB may be directed at the organization or at any specific individuals within the organization such as the supervisors and the co-workers (Dalal, Lam, Weiss, Welch, &Hulin, 2009). Past research has noted that OCB and CWB are distinct constructs (Dalal, 2005).

According to the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; as cited in Wayne, Shore, &Liden, 1997), there is an unspoken obligation to reciprocate quality social interactions. Consistent with the theory, past research has noted that employees are more likely to engage in OCB whenever they trust that their employer would act in their interests (Organ, 1998). In addition, studies on workplace social exchange relationships suggest that employees tend to exhibit OCB to reciprocate high quality leader-member exchange relationships (Illes, Nahrgang, &Morgeson, 2007). Likewise, employees are more likely to help others in their groups when they have high quality team-member exchange (Kamdar& Van Dyne, 2007).

According to Penney and Spector (2005), job stressors such as heavy workload, interpersonal conflict, and organizational constraints could elicit negative emotions such as anger, because the job stressors could prevent employees from achieving desired objectives, and may in turn lead to job strains such as CWB. Mount, Ilies, and Johnson (2006) reported that job dissatisfaction is related to both the organization-targeted CWB (CWBO) and individual-targeted CWB (CWBI). This is because when individuals are dissatisfied with their jobs, they are likely to reciprocate with negative work behavior or exert less effort in their work.

Past literature suggest that employees' trust in the organization mediates the relationships between negative experiences at work and various attitudes and behaviors of employees. According to Lo and Aryee (2003), trust in organization mediates the relationships between psychological contract breach and

employees' psychological withdrawal behavior, civic virtue, and turnover intentions. Similarly, Montes and Irving (2008) showed that organizational trust mediates the relationships between relational contract breach and employees' outcomes such as satisfaction, feelings of violation, and employment intentions.

It is anticipated that when employees experience co-workers' social undermining behavior, they would lose trust in their co-workers, and they in turn are more likely to retaliate by engaging more in CWB and less in OCB. This is perhaps the first study to determine if trust

in co-workers mediates the relationships between co-workers' social undermining behavior and employees' work-behaviors.

2. Research model and hypotheses development

The aim of this study is to empirically test the role of trust in co-workers as a mediating variable between co-workers' social undermining behavior and employees' work behaviors. Figure 1 shows the research model of this study. It diagrammatically illustrates the relationships among the constructs in this study.
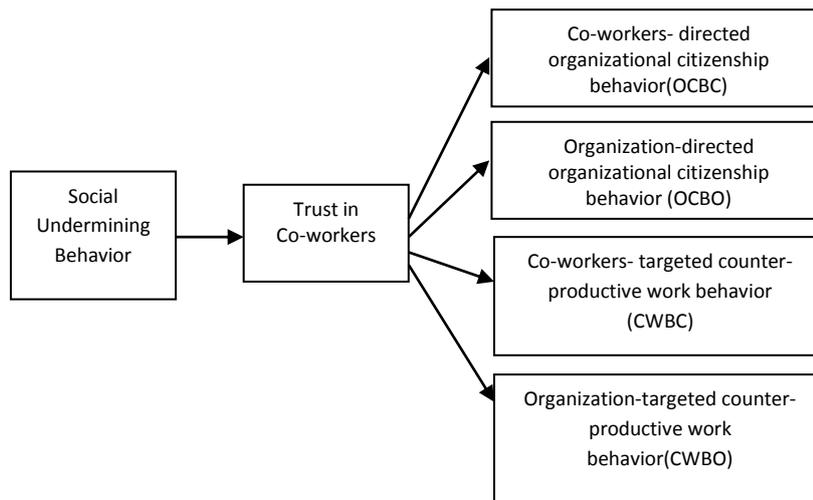

Figure1: The research model.

The social information processing theory suggests that individuals' behavior may be influenced by cues or social information from the social environment and through observations of the behavior of others (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Past studies predominantly focused on the positive aspects of workplace relationships such as social support, leader-member exchange (LMX), mentoring relationships, and

helping behavior. Relatively less attention has been devoted to the social undermining behavior in the workplace (Duffy *et al.*, 2002). Such behavior may adversely affect individual and organizational well-being. According to Duffy *et al.* (2002), supervisors' social undermining behavior leads to decreased organizational commitment. Crossley (2009) suggested that it is crucial to understand the victims'

reactions to social undermining behavior in order to promote healthy relationships, increase trust and cooperation, and prevent conflicts in the workplace.

Previous research suggests that unpleasant experiences at work could be related to the lack of trust. Experiences of psychological contract violations, according to Robinson (1996), are negatively related to trust within an employee-employer relationship. Similarly, Hill, Eckerd, Wilson, and Greer (2009) reported that unethical buyer's behavior is negatively related to trust in a buyer-supplier relationship.

Besides, past research has demonstrated that trust could be undermined through job stressors. For instance, relationship conflict among team members contributes to lower trust in team members (Langfred, 2007). Likewise, Lau and Cobb (2010) hypothesized that relationship conflict with co-workers could negatively affect trust in co-workers.

Social undermining behavior refers to intentional discourteous behavior in the workplace intended to demolish other parties' favourable reputation, their ability to carry out their work, or their ability to build and sustain positive relationships (Duffy *et al.*, 2002).

Such behavior therefore could be regarded as a job stressor. Job stressors often trigger negative emotional responses such as anger in an individual (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001), thereby could lead to dissolution of trust (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Kiefer, 2005). This study therefore hypothesizes the following:

Hypothesis 1: Co-workers' social undermining behavior is negatively related to trust in co-workers.

Trust influences employees' behavior towards others at work and plays an important role in social exchange among organizational members (Rubin, Bommer, &Bachrach, 2010). Organ (1990) highlighted that employees are more likely to reciprocate positive treatment they received from others by engaging in citizenship behavior. The reciprocation is generally based on the beliefs or expectations that the others will fulfil their obligations in the future (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Konovsky& Pugh, 1994). A meta-analysis by Colquitt *et al.* (2007) summarizes the impact of trust on employees' job performance. They conclude that employees who trust their managers have better task performance, engage more in OCB, and commit less CWB.

Trust in supervisor has been shown to be related to the supervisor-directed citizenship behavior (Wech, 2002). Researchers suggest that employees who trust their supervisors are more likely to engage in OCB (e.g., Dirks &Ferrin, 2002; Mayer & Gavin, 2005; Poon, 2006). There are also some empirical supports showing that trust in co-workers is positively related to individual's OCB. Through a longitudinal study, Choi (2006) reported that trust among organizational members tend to increase employees' helping behavior (i.e., one of the OCB dimensions). Trust in co-workers, according to Parker *et al.* (2006), is related to proactive work behavior (i.e., a behavior that encompasses both task performance and OCB). In addition, Settoon and

Mossholder (2002) showed that trust in co-workers is positively related to individual-directed OCB.

As high quality social exchanges between employees and their co-workers are likely to have spill-over effect on the organization (Chiaburu& Harrison, 2008), it is expected that employee's trust in co-workers is positively related to co-workers-directed OCB (OCBC) and organization-directed OCB (OCBO). This study hypothesizes the following:

Hypothesis 2: Trust in co-workers is positively related to (a) co-workers-directed OCB (OCBC) and (b) organization-directed OCB (OCBO)

Past research has noted that trust in organization could help to lower employees' withdrawal behavior such as absenteeism, lateness, and turnover (Beehr & Gupta, 1978). According to Ferres *et al.* (2004), trust in co-workers is negatively related to intention to leave. Taken together, previous work demonstrated that trust could mitigate the occurrence of undesirable behavior in the workplace.

Trust in senior management, according to Thau, Crossley, Bennett, and Sczesny (2007), is significantly and negatively linked to antisocial work behavior. They suggested that CWB falls under the broader construct of anti-social work behavior. Besides, according to the authors, employees tend to act in ways that protect their self-interests such as taking property from work without permission when there is little trust in the management.

Accordingly, it is hypothesized that when employees trust their co-workers, they are less likely to engage in co-workers-targeted CWB (CWBC) and organization-targeted CWB (CWBO). This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3:Trust in co-workers is negatively related to (a) co-workers-targeted CWB (CWBC) and (b) organization-targeted CWB (CWBO)

Spector and Jex's (1998) job-stress model proposes that job stressors could trigger negative emotions, and thereby may result in negative responses to the stressors. Cole, Walter, and Bruch (2008) examined the relationship between team behavior and team performance using a sample of 61 teams in a manufacturing company. The authors reported that dysfunctional behavior in work teams is negatively related to team performance through the mediating role of teams' negative feelings such as anger and anxiety.

Jones (2009) investigated the relationship between organizational justice and counter-productive work behavior (CWB). According to the author, desires for revenge against the organization significantly mediate the relationship between perceived procedural injustice and organization-targeted CWB. In addition, he found that desires for revenge against the supervisor significantly mediate the relationship between perceived interactional injustice and supervisors-targeted CWB. According to Jones, perceived injustice motivates employees to harm the source of mistreatment because it shows that the organization or the supervisor cares little about them.

Employees thus tend to engage in CWB in response to their desire for revenge.

Using a sample of 203 employees in a property management company, Miner-Rubino and Reed (2010) discovered that trust in organization significantly mediates the relationships between workplace incivility and employees' outcomes such as job satisfaction, job burnout, and turnover intentions. According to the authors, when employees experience rude behavior in the workplace, they tend to lose trust in the organization. This in turn would cause them to feel dissatisfied with their jobs and increase their intention to withdraw from work. In addition, Jehn, Rispens, and Thatcher (2010) found that task conflict is related to the negative group environment such as lower levels of trust towards other group members. This in turn may negatively affect an individual's performance and satisfaction with the group. We therefore anticipate that co-workers' social undermining behavior is likely to diminish trust in co-workers, and thereby discourage them to perform more in OCB and encourage them to engage more CWB. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4:Trust in co-workers mediates the relationships between social undermining behavior and (a) co-workers-directed OCB (OCBC), (b) organization-directed OCB (OCBO), (c) co-workers-targeted CWB (CWBC), and (d) organization-targeted CWB (CWBO).

3. Method

3.1 Samples

A total of 596 employees and 580 co-workers questionnaires were respectively distributed in ten private organizations located in Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor. Out of these, 502 employees and 383 co-workers returned the completed and usable questionnaires. The multi-source data were used to reduce the problem associated with a common method variance.

3.2 Research measures

Co-workers' social undermining behavior was evaluated by 13 items that were developed by Duffy *et al.* (2002). The internal consistency reliability of this scale in their study was .90. An example of their original co-workers' undermining items is, '*Talked bad about you behind your back.*' To enable the employees to assess their co-workers, the item was rephrased as, '*My co-workers talked bad about me behind my back.*' The employees responded to these items on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = always).

Trust in co-workers was assessed using four-item trust scale developed by Mayer and Davis (1999). They reported an internal reliability of .69 for this scale. The participating employees responded whether they agreed or disagreed with four statements such as 'I would be comfortable giving my co-workers a task or problem which was critical to me, even if I could not monitor their actions'.

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) was assessed using items adapted from Lee and Allen's (2002) measure of organization-directed OCB (OCBO) and individuals-directed OCB (OCBI). They reported a Cronbach's alpha of .88 for OCBO and .83 for OCBI in their

original study. An example of their original OCBO items is, '*Show pride when representing the organization in public.*' To enable the supervisors to evaluate the employees' OCBO, the item was rephrased as, '*This employee shows pride when representing the organization in public.*' The OCBI items were also rephrased to enable the co-workers to evaluate the participating employees' co-workers-directed OCB (OCBC). An example of the authors' original OCBI items is, '*Helps others who have been absent.*' was rephrased as, '*This employee helps other co-workers who have been absent.*' The items had seven response options ranging from 1 = never to 7 = always to measure how often the employees engaged in OCBO and OCBC.

Counter-productive Work Behavior (CWB) was measured using a 19-item scale by Bennett and Robinson (2000). The authors reported Cronbach's alphas of .81 and .78 for the organizational deviance and interpersonal deviance scales, respectively. In this study, the items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = never to 7 = always. An example of Bennett and Robinson's original organizational deviance items is, '*Taken property from work without permission.*' To enable the supervisors to clearly evaluate the employees' organization-targeted CWB (CWBO), the item was rephrased as, '*This employee took property from work without permission.*' An example of the authors' original interpersonal deviance item is, '*Acted rudely towards someone at work.*' To allow the co-workers to clearly evaluate the employees' co-workers-targeted CWB (CWBC), this item was rephrased as, '*This employee acted rudely towards other co-workers at work.*'

An exploratory factor analysis of the items used to assess the variables showed that these items represented discrete scales. All items loaded on the expected factors, each with loadings greater than .40 on that factor and less than .30 on any other factor.

3.3   Data analysis strategy

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to empirically examine the relationships among the variables. A large chi-square (χ^2) value generally indicates that the model does not adequately fit the data. Models are generally accepted when their chi-square ratios (i.e., chi-square divided by degrees of freedom) are two or less (Arbuckle, 1997, as cited in Colquitt, 2001). The comparative fit index (CFI) above .900 is often associated with the desired model fit (Bentler, 1990; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, &Tatham, 2010). In addition, lower values of the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardised root mean residual (SRMR) tend to suggest a better model fit. In general, the RMSEA of less than .08 and the SRMR of below .10 are preferred (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

4.   Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for the major variables. Overall, these zero-order correlations support the proposed model. However, to test the model, a series of structural equation models were conducted. The hypothesized structural model was tested using the IBM SPSS Amos 18 program. Multiple indices of fit were calculated to assess the models

(Kelloway, 1996). The hypothesized model provided a good fit to the data, χ^2 was 2321.34 with 1120 degrees of freedom, and a normed chi-square of 2.07. The CFI was .917, TLI was .913, with a SRMR of .06, and a RMSEA of .05.

Table 1:Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD),and Correlations of Major Variables (N=502).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SU behavior	3.00	19.32	(.97)					
2. Trust in co-workers	5.70	2.21	-.17**	(.73)				
3. OCBC	5.75	3.97	-.08*	.49**	(.82)			
4. OCBO	4.93	4.18	-.04	.16**	.13**	(.86)		
5. CWBC	1.55	2.40	.05	-.15**	-.19**	-.06	(.81)	
6. CWBO	1.79	7.01	.05	-.14**	-.12**	-.04	.36**	(.90)

Note. Coefficients alpha are in parentheses. SU behavior = social undermining behavior; OCBC = co-workers-directed OCB; OCBO = organisation-directed OCB; CWBC = co-workers-targeted CWB; CWBO = organisation-targeted CWB.
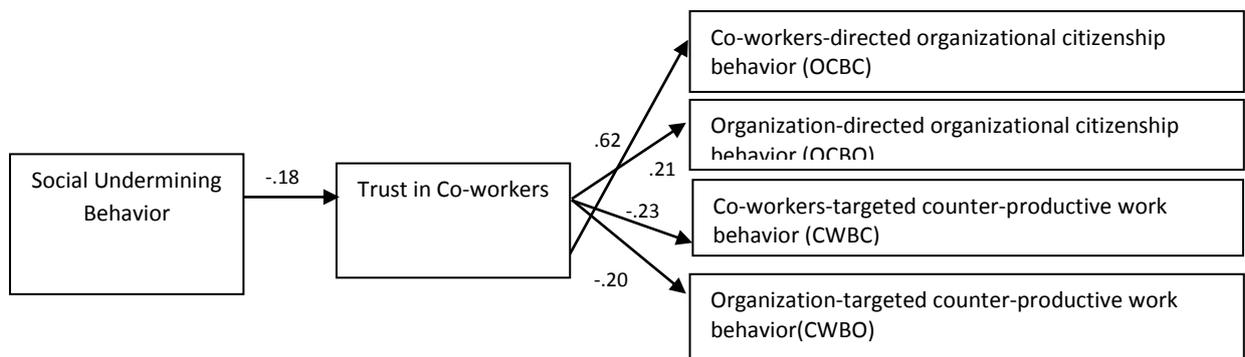*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.

Figure 2: The final model (standardized path coefficients).

Figure 2 shows the significant pathways for the model. As predicted in Hypothesis 1, co-workers' social undermining behavior was found to have a significant and negative direct relationship with trust in co-workers ($\beta = -.18$, $p<.001$).

In relation to Hypotheses 2a and 2b, trust in co-workers was reported to be positively linked to employees' OCBC and OCBO, with $\beta = .62$, $p<.001$ and $\beta = .21$, $p<.001$, respectively. Hypotheses 3a and 3b were also supported as trust in co-workers was significantly related to CWBC and CWBO, with $\beta = -.23$, $p<.001$ and $\beta = -.20$, $p<.001$, respectively.

Hypotheses 4a-d were supported as trust in co-workers fully mediated the relationship between co-workers' social undermining behavior and OCBC ($B = -.11$); between co-workers' social undermining behavior and OCBO ($B = -.04$); between co-workers' social undermining behavior and CWBC ($B = .04$); and between co-workers' social undermining behavior and CWBO ($B = .04$).

5.   Discussion

The results of this study revealed that co-workers' social undermining behavior was significantly and negatively related to employees' trust in co-workers. The findings suggested that co-workers' negative behavior would diminish trust in co-workers. Co-workers' social undermining behavior could negatively influence the employees' social work environment. Mistreatment in the workplace, according to Barling (1996), could create the feelings of fear and distrust among employees.

Cole *et al.* (2008) affirmed that the presence of dysfunctional behavior in a team creates team-members' negative emotional reactions such as anger and disgust. Langred (2007) revealed that relationship conflict in self-managing teams is negatively related to trust in team members. Similarly, Lau and Cobb (2010) suggested that relationship conflicts among the co-workers have a negative relationship with trust in co-workers. As interpersonal conflicts include rude and social undermining behavior (Ilies *et al.*, 2011), the findings of this study tend to suggest a negative relationship between co-workers' social undermining behavior and trust in co-workers.

The results of this study showed that trust in co-workers is related to employees' OCB and CWB. Trust in co-workers was found to be significantly and positively related to both co-workers directed OCB (OCBC) and organization-directed OCB (OCBO). These findings are consistent with the past research that supports the relationship between trust and OCB (e.g., Love &Forret, 2008; Yakovleva, Reilly, &Werko, 2010). According to Choi (2006), trust in co-workers is significantly and positively related to employees' helping behavior (i.e., a sub-dimension of OCB). Lau and Cobb (2010) explained that trust is necessary for reciprocal exchange among the individuals at work as it would lead to more organizational citizenship behavior. According to Konovsky and Pugh (1994), employees are likely to engage in OCB as long as they expect that their co-

workers would fulfil their obligations and provide reciprocal benefits over time. This study thus extends the findings of previous research by suggesting that trust in co-workers not only has a positive relationship with co-workers-directed OCB (OCBC), but also with organization-directed OCB (OCBO). The results indicate that the presence of trust in co-workers would benefit the organizations and their members.

The findings of this study showed that trust in co-workers is significantly and negatively related to both co-workers-targeted CWB (CWBC) and organization-targeted CWB (CWBO). Colquitt *et al.*'s (2007) meta-analysis revealed that trust has a significant and negative relationship with employees' CWB. Bowler and Brass (2006) posited that employees would engage less in co-workers-targeted CWB (CWBC) and organization-targeted CWB (CWBO) when they view their co-workers favorably. When employees trust their co-workers, they would hesitate to harm their co-workers and organizations. Trust is perhaps important to build and maintain long-term social exchange relationships (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994; Settoon & Mossholder, 2002).

This study also showed that co-workers' social undermining behavior has indirect relationships with employees' job performance. The relationships were fully mediated by trust in co-workers. These findings supported the important role of trust in co-workers in the relationships between co-workers' social

undermining behavior and employees' job performance. The findings corroborated a similar work by Robinson and Morrison (1995) establishing that the relationship between perceived contract violation and civic virtue is mediated by trust in one's employer. They warned that a sense of unfair treatment could lead to an erosion of trust, and thereby increase the likelihood that the employees would engage in more CWB and less OCB. The results of this study are consistent with Miner-Rubino and Reed's (2010) findings that trust mediates the relationship between workplace incivility and a range of employees' work outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and burnout. The co-workers' social undermining behavior could cause employees to distrust their co-workers, and distract them from focusing on performing well at work.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that the more employees trust their co-workers, the more they are perceived to engage in OCB. They are also less likely to engage in CWB. Apart from that, the results indicate that co-workers' social undermining behavior could diminish trust in co-workers, and thereby negatively affect employees' work behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study is probably the first to broaden the focus of social undermining behavior research and present a scenario of how co-workers' social undermining behavior indirectly

influences employees' job performance. Duffy *et al.* (2002) did not find significant relationships between co-workers' social undermining behavior and employees' outcomes such as self-efficacy and organizational commitment. The results of this study demonstrated that trust in co-workers fully mediates the relationships between co-workers' social undermining behavior and employees' job performance. This finding is important because it suggests that co-workers' social undermining behavior could have indirect effect on employees' outcomes, via the mechanism of trust in co-workers.

The findings highlighted the importance of reducing social undermining behavior in the workplace. The presence of social undermining behavior would weaken the relationships between employees and their co-workers because they will lose trust among themselves. In addition, co-workers' social undermining behaviour could negatively affect employees' job performance. Managers should therefore take the appropriate strategies to prevent the occurrence of social undermining behavior in the workplace by promoting trust among the employees. Preventive actions may include proactively resolving conflicts at work, communicating positive behavioral norms, encouraging employees to engage in productive activities, and eliminating unsavory role models. Management could provide training programs to equip managers with the necessary skills to

effectively intervene and overcome social undermining behavior in the workplace.

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