

It's Self Defense: How Perceived Discrimination Promotes Employee Withdrawal

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Integrating theory on stress, stigma, and coping, the present study sheds light on how employees react to perceived discrimination (PD) in the workplace. Using three national samples, we found that PD based on race, sex, age, family obligation, and sexual orientation related to physical withdrawal (i.e., lateness, absenteeism, and intent to quit) indirectly through psychological withdrawal (i.e., burnout and engagement) such that PD corresponded in less engagement and more burnout, which related to increased lateness, absenteeism, and intent to quit. Further, these indirect relationships were moderated by employees' coping mechanisms with those who were more apt to change the situation or to avoid the stressor exhibiting weaker relationships between PD and psychological withdrawal. Though each of these studies is cross-sectional in nature and therefore cannot provide strong evidence of causal ordering of the variables in our model, the replication and extension of results over three databases and multiple forms of discrimination, coping, psychological, and physical withdrawal demonstrates that understanding the relationships explored in these studies can aid researchers and practitioners in enhancing employee quality of life and productivity.

Keywords: perceived discrimination, coping strategies, engagement, burnout, withdrawal

During her term as secretary of labor (i.e., 1997–2001), Alexis Herman stated the following: “People need to know that discrimination still exists. It is still real in the workplace, and we should not take that for granted” (c.f., Wesolowski, Luzadis, & Gerhardt, 2011, p. 36). As this quotation indicates, discrimination remains an important topic for employees and organizations. This notion is supported by research that has shown the negative implications resulting from perceiving discrimination (PD; see Goldman, Gutek, Stein, & Lewis, 2006, for a detailed review). Despite the wealth of research investigating relationships between PD and various organizational outcomes, scholars have yet to explore fully physical withdrawal as an outcome of PD. In fact, this relationship has been examined in only a handful of published studies (e.g., Merritt, Ryan, Mack, Leeds, & Schmitt, 2010). A review of these studies has shown that the PD–physical withdrawal effect has been inconsistent. Some researchers have found support for it. For example, some studies have shown that perceived age, sexual orientation, sex, and race discrimination predict intentions to leave an employer (Merritt et al., 2010; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Redman & Snape, 2006). However, others have not found support for the relationship between PD and physical withdrawal, because neither ethnic-, race-, nor sex-based harassment predicted withdrawal in other research (Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008). There-

fore, the PD–physical withdrawal direct relationship has been inconsistent at best.

In addition to inconsistent direct effects, research has yet to ascertain how (i.e., intervening mechanisms) or for whom (i.e., boundary conditions) these relationships occur. This may be because scholars have rarely looked at PD–outcome relationships through existing management or psychological theories that can help to explain this organizational phenomenon (Goldman et al., 2006). Further, the observed inconsistencies in the literature may be because the relationship is actually indirect through psychological withdrawal, or the pathways between PD and physical withdrawal may be moderated. Due to the failure to consider these possibilities, theory lags considerably behind empirical research on the topic, leaving a void in our understanding of how victims of discrimination respond their perceived mistreatment.

To help fill these gaps in the current research, the present study developed theory about the PD–physical withdrawal relationship, an outcome of importance due to financial ramifications (e.g., Sagie, Birati, & Tziner, 2002). In general, we argue that the indirect relationship between PD and physical withdrawal is explained by psychological withdrawal and moderated by coping strategies (see Figure 1). We tested these notions over three studies that explored five types of PD (i.e., sex, race, age, family obligation, and sexual orientation), two forms of psychological withdrawal (i.e., burnout and disengagement), three kinds of physical withdrawal (i.e., lateness, absence, and intent to quit [ITQ]), and two coping strategies (i.e., changing the situation and avoidance).

The present investigation contributes to the literature in a number of important ways. First, scholars have, for the most part, yet to consider physical withdrawal as an outcome of PD. Further, of the six studies that have been done so far, none has examined lateness as a dependent variable, as we do in the present study.

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