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The Influence of Supervisor Undermining on Self-Esteem, Creativity, and Overall Job Performance: A Multiple Mediation Model

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Drawing from the supervisor undermining and creativity literature, this study explores the influence of supervisor undermining on employee self-esteem, creative performance, and overall job performance in the workplace. Using data obtained from subordinate–supervisor dyads ($N = 123$) in various organizations, this study specifically suggests that supervisor undermining adversely impacts employee creativity through the mediation process of employee self-esteem. Additionally, this study finds support for a positive relationship between employee creativity and overall job performance. Ultimately, the current study proposes a multiple mediation model whereby supervisor undermining indirectly influences employee overall job performance through the mediation mechanisms of employee self-esteem and employee creativity. The study concludes with theoretical and practical implications, as well as future research avenues.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Supervisor undermining; self-esteem; creativity; job performance

For more than a decade, there has been a growing interest on the part of the research and the business community in exploring the dark side of leadership in the workplace (Tepper, 2007). Notably, this increased interest has collided with numerous eminent organizational scandals that were largely due to the type of leadership that existed in these organizations (e.g., Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Huang & Paterson, 2014; Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010; Piccolo, Greenbaum, & Eissa, 2012; Toor & Ofori, 2009). Because of the many evident negative and dysfunctional workplace outcomes associated with such leadership, recent research has attempted to identify various types of “bad” leadership in an effort to help predict and prevent these negative and dysfunctional consequences. In this study, we sought to contribute to this emerging body of literature on the dark side of leadership by focusing on a specific type of negative leadership that has received relatively limited research attention thus far, namely, supervisor undermining in the workplace.

Supervisor undermining is defined as supervisor “behavior intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation” (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002, p. 332). Supervisor undermining behaviors include (a) putting subordinates down when they question work procedures, (b) belittling them or their ideas, (c) talking down to them, (d) undermining their efforts to be successful, and (e) making them feel incompetent. Despite the serious implications of supervisor undermining in the workplace (Duffy et al., 2002), many questions are still unexplored in regard to its specific outcomes. For example, research suggests that supervisor undermining is related to increased withdrawal behaviors, turnover intentions, and counterproductive work behaviors, as well as reduced job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and the health and well-being of employees (Duffy et al., 2002; Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013; Nahum-Shani, Henderson, Lim, & Vinokur, 2014). However, little is known about the influence of supervisor undermining on both employee creativity and overall job performance—both of which are critically important to the success of today’s organizations. Additionally, while research on supervisor undermining has merely focused on examining simple associations with its outcomes, it is still unclear whether supervisor undermining impacts work outcomes directly or indirectly. In this study, we offer a detailed investigation by building and testing a
A theoretical model that explains how and through what mechanisms supervisor undermining may influence employee creativity and overall job performance.

Creativity is defined as the production of useful and novel ideas (Amabile, 1988; Zhang, Kwan, Zhang, & Wu, 2012) and is essential to innovation and, hence, the effectiveness and survival of organizations (e.g., Kijkuit & Van Den Ende, 2007; Zhang et al., 2012). Examples of creativity include suggesting new ways to achieve goals or objectives, proposing new ways to increase the quality of products or customer service, developing creative solutions to various work problems, and exhibiting ingenuity when given the opportunity (see Zhang & Bartol, 2010b). In accordance with the componential theory of creativity (Amabile, 1996), one of the key contextual inhibitors of employee creative performance is merely undermining their individual job capabilities and competencies through critical job evaluations. Supervisors who commonly engage in social undermining behaviors typically are unsupportive, discourage employees’ work ideas, and make them feel incompetent (Duffy et al., 2002). Supervisor undermining may, then, represent a prime example of workplace critical evaluations that is likely to obstruct and hinder employees’ creative performance and, ultimately, their overall job performance. Although there is consistent empirical support linking effective and ineffective forms of leadership to employee performance, research has largely omitted linking supervisor undermining, a specific form of dysfunctional leadership, to employee creativity and overall job performance (e.g., Amabile et al., 2004). Such omission is notably perplexing since research has consistently shown that supervisor undermining behaviors greatly determine how employees behave and function at their jobs (Duffy et al., 2002). Accordingly, this study attempts to provide a theoretical argument and empirical support to address this research limitation.

Nevertheless, while we argue that supervisor undermining is likely to adversely influence the sequence of employee creativity and overall job performance as depicted in Figure 1, our theoretical model is also consistent with the literature on creativity, including research on the componential theory of creativity, which suggests a mediated sequence between supervisor behaviors and employee creative performance. Specifically, Amabile et al. (2004) argued that the link between a leader’s behaviors and employee creativity may likely occur through the process of the perceptual reaction of the self (i.e., how employees feel about themselves as they interact with their supervisors influences their creativity level at work). Accordingly, following their suggestion, we sought to examine employee self-esteem as a key mediator in the proposed sequence of the supervisor undermining–self-esteem–creativity–overall job performance relationships as indicated in our theoretical model.

Based on the preceding discussion, this study is designed to contribute to the leadership and creativity literature in several ways. First, we contribute to the small but growing body of research on supervisor undermining by examining the influence of supervisor undermining on two dimensions of employee performance—creativity and overall job performance (e.g., Madjar & Ortiz-Walters, 2009)—both of which are essential to the success of today’s organizations and which have received limited research attention in relation to supervisor undermining. To do so, we draw on the componential theory of creativity and concepts within the creativity literature (Amabile, 1996; Amabile et al., 2004) to argue that supervisor undermining creates a negative work environment that is highly unsupportive of employees and their creative efforts. Second, because the influence of negative leadership behaviors on workplace outcomes typically occurs through some form of mediation mechanisms (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Jian, Kwan, Qiu, Liu, & Yim, 2012; Zhang et al., 2012), we contribute to the literature by arguing a similar pattern. We suggest that the relationship between supervisor undermining and employee creative performance is likely to occur through the mediation process of employee self-esteem—an important and essential factor of individuals’ creative performance (e.g., Wang & Wang, 2016). In this way, we incorporate the perceptual reaction of the self to explore the sequence of leadership, the self, and creativity as suggested by creativity scholars (Amabile et al., 2004). Third, we provide support to the notion that

Figure 1. Hypothesized theoretical model. Dashed lines indicate mediation hypotheses.
employee creativity is highly related to overall job performance—filling a gap in the literature with few empirical findings (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010a). We argue that highly creative employees are viewed positively by their supervisors and thus are more likely to receive higher supervisory performance evaluations. Finally, to complete our theoretical model, we argue that the link between supervisor undermining and overall job performance occurs through two mediation mechanisms (viz., self-esteem and creativity), suggesting that supervisor undermining influences overall job performance indirectly. We integrate and test our multiple mediation model (Figure 1) using multisource field data from various organizations in various industries.

Hypotheses development

Supervisor undermining, self-esteem, and creativity

According to the componential theory of creativity (Amabile, 1996), employees’ work environments are likely to have an impact on their creativity level. An important aspect of the work environment is leadership or the relationship leaders have with their subordinates (Amabile, 1996; Duffy et al., 2002). Such relationships may have a significant impact on various employee outcomes, including affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes (Duffy et al., 2002). In relation to creativity, prior research suggests that positive and effective forms of leadership are likely to stimulate employees’ engagement in the creative process, resulting in higher levels of creativity (Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009; Pan, Sun, & Chow, 2012; Zhang & Bartol, 2010b). This is because positive forms of leadership may often create an intrinsically motivating work environment in which employees can be creative. In this study, we undertake an opposite view by incorporating negative forms of leadership behaviors to examine such a relationship. We argue that supervisor undermining likely impedes the creative performance of employees since undermining behavior builds an unsupportive work environment—where a supportive one is a fundamental component of workplace creativity (Amabile, 1996, 2013). However, we expect this relationship to occur through the mediation process of self-esteem.

Supervisor undermining is similar to, yet theoretically distinct from, other forms of dysfunctional leadership. The construct most closely related to supervisor undermining is abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007), which is defined as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Previous scholars recognize and acknowledge that supervisor undermining and abusive supervision are distinct (e.g., Duffy et al., 2002; Hershcovis, 2011; Mawritz, Folger, & Latham, 2014; Tepper, 2007). For example, abusive supervision includes outward forms of leadership aggression, like invading privacy, expressing anger, lying, and explicitly putting subordinates down in front of others (see Tepper, 2000). In contrast, supervisor undermining targets subordinates’ work success and goals and includes more subtle forms of mistreatment that may hurt feelings and/or prompt feelings of incompetence, like talking negatively behind subordinates’ backs, criticizing their work, belittling their work efforts, and undermining their contributions (see Duffy et al., 2002). Moreover, supervisor undermining denotes intent by the supervisor and directly suggests that social and work relationships are likely hindered (Hershcovis, 2011; Mawritz et al., 2014). Because supervisor undermining specifically targets employees’ work success and reputations within their work environment, one could assume that supervisor undermining has a strong impact on how employees feel about themselves and their ability to perform creatively at their job. As noted, we first argue that supervisor undermining is likely to adversely impact employees’ levels of self-esteem, which then adversely influence their creativity and overall job performance.

Self-esteem is employees’ overall evaluations of their competencies (Rosenberg, 1965). Employees high in self-esteem “tend to evaluate their personal characteristics favorably, seeing themselves as competent, capable, accepted, and valued by others” (Nahum-Shani et al., 2014, p. 487). In contrast, those who are low in self-esteem typically feel like failures and view themselves as incompetent and useless (Rosenberg, 1965). As noted by Thatcher and Brown (2010), the belief that someone has in his or her capability and self-worth is essential to producing creative outcomes. Indeed, research has long argued that self-esteem positively impacts important work outcomes, including employee task performance (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989; Rank, Nelson, Allen, & Xu, 2009). Notably, those with high self-esteem are also found to be more intrinsically motivated to perform at a higher level (Hui & Lee, 2000; Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Pierce et al., 1989). Similarly, extant research suggests that individuals with high self-esteem are able to maintain high intrinsic motivation (e.g., Wang & Wang, 2016; Zhang et al., 2012), which has long been shown to be related to creativity (Amabile, 1996, 2013). Those with high self-esteem are also likely to have a stronger sense of competency (Gardner & Pierce, 1998),
which is likely to contribute to their engagement in the creative process at work. Taken together, given that they are confident in their capabilities, are not afraid of taking risks, are intrinsically motivated, and feel worthwhile and valued by others, those with high self-esteem are more likely to proactively engage in the creative process and thus are more likely to generate and produce creative ideas and solutions at work.

However, consistent with research on creativity (Amabile et al., 2004), we argue that supervisor undermining creates a negative work environment that diminishes employee self-esteem. Research demonstrates that employee self-esteem often fluctuates over time, either positively or negatively, depending on the situation or event encountered (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Nonetheless, research suggests that self-esteem is more likely influenced by negative events (such as those of supervisor undermining) as opposed to positive ones (Schroth & Shah, 2000). Because employees often view the behaviors of their supervisors “as indicative of the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being” (Nahum-Shani et al., 2014, p. 484), supervisor undermining behaviors are likely to have a strong impact on employees’ self-confidence. Indeed, Amabile (2013) notes that a major factor that blocks creativity is strictly criticizing new ideas or questioning new work procedures, both of which are indicative of supervisor undermining behaviors. In this way, frequently receiving critical job evaluations from supervisors can largely affect how employees feel about themselves and others as well as their work capabilities. As noted by Duffy et al. (2002), “evaluations that are negative, rejecting, or devalutative … often result in social estrangement and diminished self-confidence” (p. 335). Research also demonstrates that social relationships can help either build or diminish employees’ self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) and that self-esteem, in effect, finds its roots in the employer–employee relationship (see Pierce & Gardner, 2004).

As supervisors engage in undermining behaviors, such as belittling employees’ ideas or criticizing the way they handle work in an unproductive manner, one could expect employees’ level of self-esteem to suffer. That is, since supervisors have formal assigned roles, the way they treat and interact with subordinates is likely to largely influence subordinates’ perceptions of themselves. Notably, prior research has suggested that when employees experience negative supervisor–employee interactions, they feel as though their reputation and success are being threatened (e.g., Keashly & Harvey, 2005; Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012; Zhang et al., 2012). As supervisors begin to engage in undermining behaviors by putting employees down when they question issues or by making them feel like failures, employees start to doubt their capabilities within the organization. Indeed, supervisor undermining has been shown to adversely influence organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and employee health and well-being (Duffy et al., 2002, 2006).

Along these lines, it is then expected that supervisor undermining will negatively impact employee creative performance through diminished employee self-esteem. Relatedly, research suggests that positive forms of leadership behaviors are positively associated with increased levels of employee creativity (Amabile et al., 2004; Rank et al., 2009); nonetheless, little research has explored this notion through the lens of supervisor undermining. As discussed, and consistent with the componential theory of creativity (Amabile, 1996), the undermining behaviors undertaken by supervisors are likely to create a negative work environment whereby employees receive less support and encouragement to generate useful and novel ideas. As noted by Amabile et al. (2004), “Subordinates will be more creative when they perceive their immediate supervisors as being supportive of them and their work” (p. 7). However, undermining behaviors are likely to lead employees to believe they are incompetent as they are likely to instill feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. For example, Duffy et al. (2002) argued and found support for the idea that supervisor undermining, such as belittling employees, inhibits their effort to be successful and reduces their self-efficacy. In this way, supervisor undermining behaviors likely hinder employees’ evaluation of their self, as well as their ability to manage and control work-related situations (e.g., Amabile et al., 2004), which, in turn, influences their creative performance at work. Therefore, we propose the following three hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Supervisor undermining is negatively related to employee self-esteem.

**Hypothesis 2:** Employee self-esteem is positively related to employee creativity.

**Hypothesis 3:** Employee self-esteem mediates the relationship between supervisor undermining and employee creativity.

**Employee creativity and overall job performance**

While there is limited research evidence linking employee creativity to job performance (Zhang &
Bartol, 2010a), numerous empirical studies provide general support for this notion. For example, research suggests there is a significant positive relationship between (a) employees’ creative performance and traditional work outcomes, including performance evaluations (Oldham & Cummings, 1996), as well as (b) employees’ creative performance and reported sales performance (Gong et al., 2009). Additionally, research argues that effective job performance in part necessitates the integration of various useful and novel ideas (e.g., Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999). As noted by Zhang and Bartol (2010a), an essential source of an effective overall job performance is the effective engagement in the creative process and the overall creative performance itself. The authors specifically note that because today’s jobs are often complex and because creativity is an essential part of every job, “it is reasonable to expect that creative performance will then have a positive influence on overall job performance” (p. 865) (see also Gilson, 2008). This assertion is further supported by numerous studies indicating that, within contemporary organizations, employee creative performance is fundamental to successful overall organizational performance and essential to maintaining a competitive advantage; therefore, both creativity and overall job performance should be highly and positively related. Thus, we expect that those who engage in high levels of creativity at work will be rated as high performers by their immediate supervisors. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4:** Employee creativity is positively related to employee overall job performance.

**Supervisor undermining and overall job performance**

To complete our theoretical model (Figure 1), and consistent with research on supervisor undermining (Duffy et al., 2002) and creativity (Amabile, 1988, 1996; Amabile et al., 2004), we offer a multiple mediation model by which we explain how supervisor undermining is related to employee overall job performance. As indicated by our model, we expect the influence of supervisor undermining on employee overall job performance to occur through the mediation processes of both employee self-esteem and employee creative performance. While previous research has suggested that negative forms of leadership may be directly associated with reduced employee job performance, recent research suggests that social relationships between supervisors and subordinates, such as those of supervisor supportive or undermining relationships, may impact work outcomes indirectly (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Therefore, consistent with the emerging research on leadership exploring mediation processes between leadership and employee outcomes (e.g., Aryee et al., 2008; Jian et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2012), we expect a similar pattern between supervisor undermining and employee overall job performance. We specifically argue that there is a negative and indirect relationship between supervisor undermining and overall job performance. Drawing on the leadership and creativity research (Amabile, 1996; Amabile et al., 2004; Duffy et al., 2002), we argue that supervisor undermining discourages employee creative performance because it builds an unsupportive and discouraging work environment that obstructs and hampers the engagement in the creative process. However, the creativity literature argues a sequence by which this occurs, suggesting that a leader’s behaviors are likely to influence employees’ levels of self-esteem, which subsequently influences their creative results. Ultimately, those who produce novel and useful ideas are also more likely to be perceived as good performers overall. Taken all together, we then expect that employee self-esteem and creative performance will likely be the underlying mechanisms by which supervisor undermining influences employee overall job performance in the workplace. Thus, the following multiple mediation hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 5:** Supervisor undermining is indirectly related to employee overall job performance through the mediating processes of both (a) employee self-esteem and, in turn, (b) employee creativity.

**Method**

**Sample and procedure**

Participants for the current study were recruited from various organizations located in the midwestern United States in numerous industries, including, but not limited to, educational services, health care and science, manufacturing, and retail. In exchange for extra credit, upper level business students were asked to recruit a working adult (who worked for at least 20 hours a week) to serve as the focal-employee participant (i.e., subordinate) in the study. The focal-employee participants were then asked to invite their immediate supervisors to complete a corresponding supervisor survey by providing their supervisor’s e-mail. The supervisor’s e-mail was then used to
match the supervisor’s survey with the focal employee’s survey. All of the surveys were completed through the Internet via access to a secured link to the survey. This data collection approach is almost identical to recent research methodologies of data collection conducted in management and organizational studies (e.g., Dust, Resick, & Mawritz, 2014; Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012; Mawritz et al., 2014). In line with this research, several steps were undertaken to ensure accurate and confidential responses from all participants. In particular, as we introduced the study, the importance of integrity in the scientific process was emphasized to all participants. Second, as participants completed and submitted their on-line surveys, the IP addresses and time stamps were recorded and thoroughly inspected to ensure that the surveys were completed by different individuals at different times. Lastly, we informed participants that their responses were completely anonymous and confidential, to help reduce social desirability and ensure accurate responses. We received approximately 261 responses from the employee participants and 150 from the supervisor participants. After accounting for missing data, calculating summary statistics, ensuring appropriate Cronbach’s alphas, checking frequency distributions, and matching the data (using the supervisors’ emails), the final sample size generated 123 unique employee–supervisor dyad responses. Subordinate participants were predominately Caucasian (87.6%), had an average age of 21.66 years (ranging from 18 to 35 years), had an average organizational tenure of 2.30 years (ranging from <1 year to 19 years), and were 55.6% female. Supervisor participants were also predominately Caucasian (94.5%), had an average age of 36.03 years (ranging from 20 to 64 years), had an average organizational tenure of 8.63 years (ranging from 1 to 38 years), and were 57.8% female. Finally, as indicated in the following, data for survey items were collected at the individual level.

Measures

**Supervisor undermining**

Supervisor undermining was assessed by the subordinate participants with 13 items from the Duffy et al. (2002) supervisor undermining scale (1 = never, 7 = always). Participants were asked to indicate how often their immediate supervisor has intentionally engaged in a number of behaviors. Sample items include “Belittled you or your ideas?,” “Undermined your effort to be successful on the job?,” and “Made you feel incompetent?” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .95.

**Self-esteem**

Employee self-esteem was assessed by the subordinate participants with 10 items from Rosenberg’s (1965) self-esteem scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with a number of statements. Sample items include “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others,” “I am able to do things as well as most other people,” and “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure” (reverse coded). The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .90.

**Creativity**

Employee creativity was assessed by the supervisor participants with 12 items from Zhou and George (2001) creativity scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Supervisors were asked to indicate whether they agreed with a number of statements regarding their subordinates. Sample items include “Suggests new ways to achieve goals or objectives,” “Comes up with new and practical ideas to improve performance,” and “Searches out new technologies, processes, techniques, and/or product lines.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .97.

**Overall job performance**

Overall job performance was also assessed by the supervisor participants with 7 items from Williams and Anderson’s (1991) job performance scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Supervisors were asked to rate their subordinates on a number of items. Sample items include “Adequately completes assigned duties,” “Fulfills responsibilities specified in job description,” and “Performs tasks that are expected of him/her.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .81.

**Control variables**

As with prior research, we controlled for several demographic variables that are likely related to employee creativity and overall job performance. For example, we controlled for employee age (in years) (Zhang & Bartol, 2010b), gender (0 female, 1 male) (Zhang & Bartol, 2010a, 2010b), and organizational tenure (in years) (Zhang & Bartol, 2010b; Zhang et al., 2012) to eliminate any biases associated with these demographic variables. Furthermore, given that prior research has shown that intrinsic motivation is highly related to creativity (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010b; Zhang et al., 2012), we also controlled for employee intrinsic motivation using the three items from Zhang and Bartol’s (2010b) scale (adapted from Amabile, 1985; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999) (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Subordinates were asked to indicate
whether they agreed with a number of statements, including “I enjoy creating new procedures for work tasks.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .87.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations, coefficient reliabilities, and intercorrelations among the variables of the study are shown in Table 1.

Tests of hypotheses

We used a method described by Hayes (2013) to test the fully hypothesized multiple mediation model. Specifically, we utilized Hayes’s (2013) SPSS macro (PROCESS) for running two different analyses including (a) a simple-mediation analysis (PROCESS macro Model 4), examining the sequence of the first three variables (Table 2), and (b) a multiple-mediation analysis (PROCESS macro Model 6), examining the full sequence of the proposed model (Table 3), as indicated in Figure 1. Additionally, we ran our analyses using 5,000 bootstrapping with 95% bias confidence intervals as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

As demonstrated in Tables 2 and 3, each of the aforementioned hypotheses was supported. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 suggests that supervisor undermining is negatively related to employee self-esteem. The results provided at the top of Table 2 ($B = -.30, t = -3.23, p < .01$) demonstrate that supervisor undermining has a significant negative relationship with employee self-esteem, indicating support for Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 suggests employee self-esteem is positively related to employee creativity. The results provided in the second section of Table 2 ($B = .27, t = 2.25, p < .05$) demonstrate that employee self-esteem has a significant positive relationship with employee creativity, while also controlling for supervisor undermining, indicating support for Hypothesis 2. Furthermore, Hypothesis 3 proposes mediation, whereby employee self-esteem mediates the relationship between supervisor undermining and employee creativity. Results provided in the bottom section of Table 2 demonstrate that supervisor undermining had

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</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>
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<tr>
<td>1. Age (years)</td>
<td>21.46</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tenure (years)</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>(.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Supervisor undermining</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>(.95)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Employee self-esteem</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>(.90)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Employee creativity</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>(.97)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Overall job performance</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 123. Coefficient (α) reliabilities are shown in the diagonal.
* p < .05 level. ** p < .01 level.

Table 2. Regression results for simple mediation models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome variable: Self-esteem</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>4.86**</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor undermining</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-3.23**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-1.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-1.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>3.67**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome variable: Creativity</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>2.25*</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor undermining</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>2.10*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effect of supervisor undermining on creativity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>LL 95% CI</th>
<th>UL 95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 123. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000.
LL = lower limit; CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit.
* p < .05 level. ** p < .01 level.
a significant indirect negative effect on employee creative performance through employee self-esteem (−.08) and that the bootstrap with a 95% bias confidence interval did not contain zero (−.21, −.02). Accordingly, these results provide full support for Hypothesis 3.

Table 3 demonstrates the results for the entire hypothesized multiple mediation model. Consistent with the results presented in Table 2, supervisor undermining was shown to be negatively associated with employee self-esteem ($B = −.30$, $t = −3.23$, $p < .01$; Hypothesis 1), and employee self-esteem was shown to be positively associated with employee creative performance ($B = .27$, $t = 2.25^*$, $p < .05$; Hypothesis 2), while also controlling for supervisor undermining. Additionally, Table 3 shows results for Hypotheses 4 and 5. Specifically, Hypothesis 4 suggests that employee creativity is positively related to employee overall job performance. The results presented in the third section of Table 3 ($B = .38$, $t = 5.30$, $p < .01$) demonstrate that employee creative performance has a significant positive relationship with employee overall job performance, while controlling for both supervisor undermining and employee self-esteem. Accordingly, Hypothesis 4 was fully supported. Finally, Hypothesis 5 proposes a sequenced multiple mediation pattern as indicated in the fully specified theoretical model (Figure 1). Specifically, Hypothesis 5 suggests that supervisor undermining is indirectly related to employee overall job performance through the mediating processes of both (a) employee self-esteem and, in turn, (b) employee creative performance. Results provided in the bottom section of Table 3 demonstrate that supervisor undermining had a significant indirect negative effect (−.03) on employee overall job performance through the processes of both employee self-esteem (Hypothesis 5a) and employee creative performance (Hypothesis 5b). Furthermore, results for the indirect effect of supervisor undermining onto employee overall job performance indicate that the bootstrap with a 95% bias confidence interval did not contain zero (−.09, −.01). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was also fully supported.

Discussion

In the current study, we sought to examine how and through what mechanisms supervisor undermining influences employee creativity and overall job performance. To do so, we drew from the supervisor undermining literature (Duffy et al., 2002) and the creativity literature (Amabile, 1988, 1996; Amabile et al., 2004) to offer a multiple mediation model. We predicted, and provided empirical support, that supervisor undermining creates a damaging and unsupportive work environment for employees that diminishes their self-esteem, discourages their creative efforts, and adversely impacts their overall job performance, thus supporting
the hypothesized relationships as depicted in Figure 1. Specifically, our results support the assertion that employee self-esteem mediates the relationship between supervisor undermining and employee creativity, while both employee self-esteem and employee creativity mediate the indirect effect of supervisor undermining on employee overall job performance. We used multi-source field data, collected from employees and their supervisors, in various organizations. Our results provide general support for the associations among the variables presented in our model.

Theoretical implications

This study makes a number of contributions to the leadership and creativity literature. First, in light of the increasing interest of the research and business communities in exploring the dark side of leadership, and compared to other forms of bad leadership, supervisor undermining has received relatively little research attention thus far—despite its serious implications in the workplace (Duffy et al., 2002). This research extends our current understanding and knowledge by exploring possible consequences of supervisor undermining in the workplace. We were interested in developing and testing a multiple mediation model that answers how supervisor undermining influences important organizational outcomes including employee self-esteem, as well as two dimensions of employee performance, namely, employee creativity and employee overall job performance. While the limited research on supervisor undermining has often explored simple relationships in association to its outcomes, our research is one of the first to explain and examine the complex link between supervisor undermining and the variables presented in our proposed model.

Second, our study also contributes to the organizational literature by exploring potential antecedents and outcomes of creativity. While it is now hardly debatable that creativity and innovation are essential for maintaining a competitive advantage, and ultimately the survival of organizations (e.g., Kikkuit & Van Den Ende, 2007; Zhang et al., 2012), research has yet to examine how supervisor undermining, a specific form of leadership behavior, may impact the creative performance of employees. Additionally, while the creativity literature argues that leadership is key in predicting the level of employee creativity, research suggests that such a relationship is likely to occur through the process of the perceptual reaction of the self (Amabile et al., 2004). That is, leaders are likely to have an impact on how employees feel about themselves at work, which is likely to affect work-related outcomes, including their creativity. Our findings provide support for the notion that self-esteem mediates the association between supervisor undermining and the creative performance of employees. Notably, this finding is also consistent with prior research indicating that various forms of leadership influence work outcomes through some form of mediation mechanisms (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010b; Zhang et al., 2012). However, little research has examined such mechanisms from the perspective of supervisor undermining. As discussed, these relationships were examined by drawing from concepts within the supervisor undermining (Duffy et al., 2002) and creativity literature (Amabile, 1988, 1996; Amabile et al., 2004), suggesting that supervisor undermining diminishes employees’ self-esteem by creating an unsupportive work environment and through providing critical job evaluations, which subsequently reduce employees’ ability to produce novel and useful ideas.

Our study also provides a distinctive contribution to the creativity literature by examining an important link between employee creative performance and employee overall job performance—a surprising gap in the management and organizational literature (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010a). As previously noted, numerous research efforts have alluded to the idea that in today’s complex business economy, creativity is instrumental for achieving effective overall organizational performance; nevertheless, little research has empirically explored such assertion. Our study provides support for this notion by revealing a positive relationship between creativity and overall job performance as rated by immediate supervisors. Ultimately, we built and tested a multiple mediation model that examined the underlying mechanisms of the effect of supervisor undermining on employee overall job performance. As depicted in our model, we found support for the notion that supervisor undermining is indirectly associated with overall job performance through the mediating processes of both self-esteem and creativity. In this way, the current research adds merit to the notion that the relationship between leadership and work outcomes must be examined in light of mediation processes.

Practical implications

Within the context of the workplace, our study suggests that supervisor undermining may serve as a destructive condition for employees and ultimately their organizations by contributing to diminished levels of employee self-esteem, creativity, and overall job performance. Therefore, for organizations to survive, they must pay particular attention to such
conditions. For example, organizations must select and recruit organizational leaders who are unlikely to exhibit or engage in social undermining behaviors in the workplace. Notably, prior research (e.g., Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011) suggests that organizational leaders with certain personality traits, such as conscientiousness, are more likely to exhibit ethical leadership behaviors that help improve various work conditions. Other research demonstrates that when organizational leaders function in an ethical organizational climate, they are not only likely to be ethical and help enhance the work conditions for employees, but are also likely to provide employees with the necessary resources that help them get things done more effectively.

Additionally, organizations must provide their leaders and supervisors with the necessary training programs that could help them further develop their ethical and social leadership skills and behaviors, which could then help address the various concerns and issues related to undermining behaviors in the workplace. Such training initiatives are likely to help supervisors with creating a safer and more supportive work environment for their employees. This, in turn, will ensure that employees feel more positively about themselves and their work capabilities, are able to express their ideas more easily and freely, and will be more willing to take initiative to create solutions and alternatives to complex work situations. Indeed, research has long supported the notion that positive forms of leadership, including ethical leadership, positively influence important work outcomes such as employee voice behavior, health and well-being, work engagement, and task performance (Chughtai, Byrne, & Flood, 2015; Huang & Paterson, 2014; Mo & Shi, 2016).

**Limitations and future research avenues**

While our research intends to advance organizational research in a number important of ways, our study is not without limitations. First, while our data are multisource field data collected from various organizations within different industries, our data are cross-sectional, which prevents us from confirming the causal directions regarding the relationships presented in our model. For example, it is possible that employees with low levels of self-esteem perceive more undermining behaviors due to their low levels of self-confidence. Similarly, it is possible that employees with strong overall job performance have more time and cognitive resources to work on creative projects. Hence, these relationships would appear reversed. Additionally, as noted in the Method section, our data collection approach is similar to other management studies (e.g., Dust et al., 2014; Greenbaum et al., 2012; Mawritz et al., 2014), yet it is not without limitations. This approach allowed us to reach difficult populations and utilize multisource data, but our sample is considered a convenience sample. In light of this, future research efforts could provide further support for our theoretical model and address these limitations by perhaps utilizing a variety of data collection methods such as random sampling, longitudinal designs, and/or experimental designs.

Furthermore, while we found support for the notion that supervisor undermining is related to diminished levels of employee creative performance via employee self-esteem, other potential mechanisms are also likely. For example, we did not actually measure employee engagement in the actual creative process, which has been shown to predict creativity. Prior research suggests that *creative process engagement*, defined as “employee involvement in creativity-relevant methods or processes, including (1) problem identification, (2) information searching and encoding, and (3) idea and alternative generating” (Zhang & Bartol, 2010b, p. 108), is essential to generating creative outcomes. Based on our theoretical rationale, supervisor undermining will likely have an adverse influence on such a process, leading employees to be less creative. Future research could then benefit from examining employee creative process engagement as a potential mediator among our proposed relationships. Additionally, future research could examine other likely mediators of the self, including the broader dimensions of core self-evaluations and core confidence such as self-efficacy and resiliency (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003; Stajkovic, 2006), which may further contribute to our understanding of the relationship between supervisor undermining and employee creativity and overall job performance.

Another potential limitation of our study is that we did not include or test any moderators within our multiple mediation model, which could potentially impact the strength among these hypothesized relationships. For example, we expect that certain personality traits or individual differences (e.g., openness to experience, neuroticism) serve as potential moderators that may either strengthen or weaken the negative impact of supervisor undermining on its proposed consequences. Additionally, we expect that variables pertaining to employee creative performance, such as employee work experience (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010a) and psychological empowerment (e.g., Spreitzer, 1995; Zhang & Bartol, 2010b), also impact the magnitude of these relationships. Hence, an examination of moderators provides future
researchers the opportunity to add to and further explain the relationships within our model.

In conclusion, this study was designed to offer researchers and practitioners an initial explanation of how and through what mechanisms supervisor undermining is associated with employee creative performance and overall job performance. Although we found that supervisor undermining adversely influences the creative performance of employees, the relationship was largely due to employees’ perception of their own self-esteem. Moreover, our results suggest that employee creativity positively impacts overall job performance. This way, our findings demonstrate that the negative influence of supervisor undermining on overall job performance occurs through the mediation processes of self-esteem and creativity.

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