

**The Pragmatic Side of Workplace Heroics:**

**A Self-Interest Perspective on Responding to Mistreatment in Work Teams**

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**Abstract**

Research on third-party reactions to workplace mistreatment has often focused on a moral perspective, but has devoted limited attention to the role of self-interest. Drawing from a self-interest perspective, we develop a conceptual model that examines how self-interest influences third-party responses to mistreatment within work teams. Several important relational (justice reputation, social status, relationship with the target, power) and situational (number of observers, mistreatment intensity) factors are posited to influence third-party perceptions of team members' expectations for their intervention, and perceptions of the expected salience of their response to their team members. These perceived expectations for intervention are theorized to positively influence the expected salience of their response, which is strengthened under conditions of ethical leadership, ethical climate, and ethical HRM practices. In turn, third parties use a cost-benefit analysis to decide how to respond in a manner that serves their interests, which is moderated by several key factors (probability that intervention alleviates the mistreatment, perceived risk of intervention, third-party vulnerability). We advance a novel process-based conceptual model that provides an alternative lens as to why third parties may intervene during mistreatment within work teams.

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## Introduction

A serious organizational issue that continues to garner the attention of organizational leaders around the world is that of interpersonal mistreatment, which occurs when an employee directs negative interpersonal actions (e.g., swearing, isolating others, public humiliation, sexual harassment, physical assault) towards another individual (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019; Lim & Cortina, 2005). The prevalence of mistreatment is startling: “almost all employees have heard of or witnessed colleagues being mistreated” (Li et al., 2019, p. 360). An important avenue in which to curb workplace mistreatment relates to the instrumental role of third parties, which underscores the need to better understand what motivates third-party responses to mistreatment (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019).

Third parties are defined as employees who are not involved in the act of mistreatment, but have observed or become sufficiently aware of a situation where an employee has been mistreated by another employee (e.g., O’Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). This definition focuses on employees, and excludes external constituents (e.g., customers, investors). We focus on third-party responses to mistreatment within work teams, given that teams are ubiquitous in modern organizations (Gómez et al., 2000). Building on the work of others (e.g., Alderfer, 1977; Hackman, 1987), Guzzo and Dickson (1996) defined teams as a work group that is “made up of individuals who see themselves and who are seen by others as a social entity, who are interdependent because of the tasks they perform as members of a group, who are embedded in one or more larger social systems (e.g. community, organization), and who perform tasks that affect others (such as customers or coworkers)” (p. 308). Team membership is highly salient because teams are often highly stable and proximate (Kramer, 1991; Marks & Lockyer, 2005). Thus, we focus on third-party decision-making in response to mistreatment in work teams (i.e.,

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mistreatment that occurs between team members). Third parties may play an important role in addressing this mistreatment in that individuals “may have greater expectations of positive interactions” due to their ongoing work exchanges (Inness et al., 2008, p. 1408).

Third parties are particularly influential in diminishing mistreatment within teams for several reasons. First, third parties can be instrumental in shaping how targets respond to mistreatment. For example, family, friends, and colleagues can guide terminated workers to file discrimination claims against their previous employer (Goldman, 2001). Second, third-party responses to mistreatment can be influenced by prior outcomes (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008), in that positive outcomes of third-party intervention can help to diminish mistreatment by fostering future interventions. Third, third parties can be instrumental in resolving mistreatment through intervention (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011), which occurs when third parties engage in behaviors (e.g., stopping the mistreatment, helping the victim report the incident) that help resolve the mistreatment. Thus, there is an important need for a better understanding of the motivations underlying third-party intervention (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019).

To date, research on third-party intervention has been primarily grounded within a moral perspective (Skarlicki et al., 2015). This vein of research has significantly advanced the dialogue on third-party reactions, but this focus limits an in-depth understanding of how other motivations, such as self-interest, influence reactions. Given that the extant literature may not be fully capturing the complete picture of the motivations underpinning third-party responses to mistreatment, we use a self-interest lens to understand why self-interest can motivate inaction or intervention. Specifically, we develop a multi-level process-based conceptual model to examine how the relational characteristics of the third party and the mistreatment characteristics influence the third party’s perception of their team members’ expectation for their intervention, and the

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expected salience of their response to their team members. Moreover, the third party's perception of their team members' expectation for intervention can positively influence their perception of the expected salience of their response to their team members, which is moderated by several ethically-related organizational characteristics (ethical leadership, ethical climate, ethical HRM practices). In turn, the expected response salience affects the anticipated costs and benefits of inaction and intervention, which is affected by several factors (probability that intervention alleviates the mistreatment, perceived risk of intervention, third-party vulnerability). The third party's response is contingent upon a cost-benefit analysis that determines the likelihood that intervention serves their personal interests (Beugré, 2005).

This manuscript makes three important contributions. First, we present a comprehensive process model that explains why a third party can be motivated to intervene in mistreatment within work teams, which provides a more complete account of how self-interest can underlie third-party reactions to mistreatment. We advance HRM research by pointing to the importance of recognizing that some third parties are motivated solely by self-serving (rather than moral) concerns, which is a critical first step for HR to acknowledge when determining how to address mistreatment. Second, we advance the theoretical literature on third-party reactions by identifying several important relational, situational, and organizational characteristics that shape self-interest motivations. Importantly, this advances our understanding of *which* and *when* third parties intervene for self-interest reasons, providing nuanced insights into the HRM literature on who and when third parties may serve as 'ethical champions' (Chen et al., 2020). Third, we suggest that third parties may use a cost-benefit analysis to consider the expected costs and benefits of inaction and intervention to determine how to respond. This process is affected by several moderators that may (not) further motivate third-party intervention: the probability that

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intervention alleviates mistreatment, the perceived risk of intervention, and third-party vulnerability. Given that the best HRM interventions are education-focused (Salin et al., 2020), we suggest these programs should emphasize the benefits (and limited costs) for third parties.

### **Third-Party Reactions to Workplace Mistreatment: Moral and Self-interest Motivations**

Third-party reactions to workplace mistreatment have garnered significant attention for several reasons. While research has traditionally focused on how and why targets of mistreatment respond, research reveals that third-party reactions differ substantially from target reactions (Li et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2012). This underscores the need to better understand third-party decision-making processes, especially given the limited (albeit growing) research in this area. In addition, observing (or becoming aware of) mistreatment also negatively affects third-party wellbeing (e.g., Dionisi & Barling, 2018; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Sims & Sun, 2012), which further underscores the need to reduce mistreatment. For example, observed male gender harassment is associated with greater physical and psychological health issues (Dionisi & Barling, 2018). Lastly, there are often a considerable number of third parties for each incident (Skarlicki et al., 2015), suggesting that third-party intervention can have significant practical implications for diminishing mistreatment.

Morality and self-interest are two primary reasons why third parties care about the mistreatment of others (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Most third-party research rests within a moral perspective (Folger, 2001) that posits third parties care about mistreatment because it violates the moral norm that others should be treated in a moral manner. Self-interest perspectives (Miller, 1999; Piliavin et al., 1981; Shao et al., 2018) suggest that third parties are motivated based on their self-interest, in that their responses to mistreatment can have important self-serving implications. For example, individuals often seek process control (e.g., voice) in decision-

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making because it can serve their personal interests (Saundry et al., 2018; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Third-party reactions to mistreatment may therefore be influenced by self-interest, as moral concerns do not always motivate third-party reactions (Li et al., 2019). Specifically, third-party intervention can offer an array of benefits: feeling heroic for stopping the mistreatment, creating a more favorable image, feeling unselfish for helping the target, and signaling positive attributes (e.g., courage) and skills (e.g., leadership). Therefore, we offer an explanation of third-party responses to mistreatment in work teams by exploring the role of self-interest.

### **Third-Party Reactions to Mistreatment in Work Teams: A Self-Interest Conceptual Model**

We develop a process-based conceptual model (Figure 1) that examines why third parties can be motivated to respond to mistreatment within teams out of self-interest. Team members are central to this model: we focus on team members as the targets, perpetrators, and third parties. As alluded, the third party refers to a focal team member who is not involved in the act of mistreatment, but has observed or become sufficiently aware of it (Reich & Dhensa-Kahlon, 2022). Our model starts by identifying several relational and situational characteristics that influence third-party perceptions of their team members' (including the target) expectation for intervention, and the expected response salience to their team members (including the target).<sup>1</sup> Salience refers to how strongly a stimulus (e.g., a third party intervening in mistreatment) stands out to others who encode, evaluate, and pass judgement on this social stimuli (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Taylor & Thompson, 1982). That is, the salience of the third party's response reflects how noticeable their reaction is to their team members. We further posit that a third party's beliefs of their team members' expectation for intervention can positively

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<sup>1</sup> Given the importance of target expectations for intervention (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Reich & Dhensa-Kahlon, 2022), we conceptualize team members' expectation for intervention to include the target's expectation. We exclude the perpetrator, as they instigate the mistreatment.

influence their perception of the expected response salience to their team members, which is moderated by several organizational characteristics. In turn, this response salience influences the expected costs and benefits from inaction and intervention, which is further moderated by several critical factors. The third party then determines how to respond based on their personal interests.

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INSERT FIGURE 1  
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### **Antecedents to Perceived Expectations and Perceived Response Salience**

The third-party's decision-making process considers their perception that their team members expect intervention, and the expected salience of their response to their team members. Not all third parties will sense these expectations and not all third parties will expect a salient response, which denotes the need to identify the factors that foster these perceptions. We focus on relational (reputation, social status, relationship with the target, power) and situational (number of observers, mistreatment intensity) factors that influence third-party perceptions.

#### ***Relational Characteristics***

**Justice reputation.** Reputations represent collective perceptions of an individual's core (positive or negative) attributes (Bromley, 1993). Positive reputations often result in desirable outcomes, such as an elevated status and career success (Blickle et al., 2011; Bromley, 1993), and negative reputations often lead to unfavorable outcomes, such as marginalization (Bergmann, 1993). Individuals tend to deliberately manage their reputation based on the expected outcomes (Bromley, 1993). We posit a third party's justice reputation influences whether the third party believes their team members expect them to intervene, and whether the third party expects their response to be salient to their team members.

Reputations derive from an informal record of prior behaviors (Zinko et al., 2007). As such, third parties with a justice reputation are likely to have previously demonstrated justice-



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oriented behaviors. For example, employees believe that organizational changes are expected to be implemented in a fair manner when supervisors have a justice reputation (Rodell & Colquitt, 2009). Given that individuals usually attempt to adhere to this record by acting consistently (Baumeister, 1982), a third party with this reputation is likely to perceive that their team members expect intervention from them because mistreatment is a form of injustice.

Highly visible individuals tend to receive more attention and are often subject to more scrutiny (Flynn & Amanatullah, 2012). Given that individuals with well-known reputations are more prominent and publicly visible (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994), a third party with a strong justice reputation is likely to attract attention during mistreatment as it is an injustice. This suggests that third parties are likely to expect that their response will be salient to their team members as they are known for behaving in a justice-oriented manner. As such, a third party with a justice reputation will likely garner significant attention following mistreatment, which enhances a third party's perception of the expected salience of their response. Therefore, a third party with a strong justice reputation is likely to perceive that their team members hold high expectations for their intervention, and is likely to perceive that their response will be salient.

*Proposition 1a:* The third party's justice reputation is positively related to the third party's perception of their team members' expectation for their intervention.

*Proposition 1b:* The third party's justice reputation is positively related to their perception of the expected salience of their intervention or inaction to their team members.

**Social status.** Social status refers to the esteem, prestige, and respect ascribed to an individual (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), which is conferred by others (Homans, 1961). Since high status is associated with positive outcomes, individuals often strive to obtain (or maintain) high status, which can involve enacting justice-oriented behaviors (Blader & Chen, 2012). A third party who is conferred high social status is likely to perceive that their team members expect

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intervention, and is likely to perceive that their response will be salient to their team members due to the ascription of positive characteristics that underlie high social status.

Individuals with high status are likely to enact justice toward others because status maintenance requires adherence to expectations (Blader & Chen, 2012), suggesting that high-status individuals are attuned to the expectations that others have of them. To illustrate, Sutton and Hargadon (1996) show that high-performing design engineers who were conferred high status (largely due to their strong technical skills) were subject to behavioral expectations from others, in that they received invitations to contribute to forthcoming projects. This illustration underscores a thread in status research: high status makes individuals prominent, well-known, and visible, which is associated with greater expectations and influence (Anderson et al., 2001). Thus, high-status third parties are likely to perceive that their team members expect intervention, as their status enables them to influence others.

High-status individuals are often held to expectations to interact with others in a respectful and honorable manner (Blader & Chen, 2012). As such, high-status third parties are likely to perceive that their response to the mistreatment will be salient, given that those with high status are visible (Flynn et al., 2006). Since attention is a limited resource, high-status employees are likely to garner more attention than those with low status (Graffin et al., 2013). High-status individuals tend to be associated with greater levels of perceived scrutiny (Flynn, 2003). Thus, third parties who are conferred high social status are likely to perceive that team members expect intervention, and that their response will be salient.

*Proposition 2a:* The third party's status is positively related to the third party's perception of their team members' expectation for their intervention.

*Proposition 2b:* The third party's status is positively related to their perception of the expected salience of their intervention or inaction to their team members.

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**Relationship with the target.** A third party's relationship with the target of mistreatment can influence their reaction (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). This refers to the quality of the relationship between the third party and the target of the mistreatment, wherein high-quality relationships are based on support, trust, empathy, and concern (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). Thus, third parties who have a high-quality relationship with the target are likely to perceive that their team members expect intervention, and that their response is likely to be salient.

Work relationship quality is connected to help from others (Anderson & Williams, 1996). Individuals are likely to intervene in mistreatment when they consider the target a 'work friend' rather than a 'work colleague' because of their high-quality relationship (Madden & Loh, 2020). For example, D'Cruz and Noronha (2011) found that high-quality relationships "prompted participants to go all out to help targets" of workplace bullying (p. 285). This suggests that high-quality relationships involve social exchanges, which includes a willingness to help others (Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007). Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that employees who receive a benefit experience a personal obligation to reciprocate. Social exchanges involve valued non-tangible resources that are voluntary and without explicit exchange conditions (Das & Teng, 2002), wherein there is a shared expectation that the other will reciprocate, albeit in an unspecified manner (Blau, 1964). Thus, third parties with a high-quality relationship with the target are likely to believe that their team members expect intervention.

Since others are aware of differences in relationship quality (Vidyarthi et al., 2010) and given that high-quality relationships entail social exchanges that are characterized by support (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002), team members are likely keenly aware of how a third party reacts when their close colleague is mistreated. Thus, a third party who has a high-quality relationship with the target is likely to perceive that their response to the mistreatment will be salient to their

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team members. In sum, third parties with a high-quality relationship with the target are likely to perceive their team members expect intervention, and that their response will be salient to them.

*Proposition 3a:* The third party's quality of their relationship with the target of the mistreatment is positively related to the third party's perception of their team members' expectation for their intervention.

*Proposition 3b:* The third party's quality of their relationship with the target of the mistreatment is positively related to their perception of the expected salience of their intervention or inaction to their team members.

**Power.** Since power is central to social interactions (Keltner et al., 2003), power can play an important role in determining how individuals respond to mistreatment (Hershcovis et al., 2017). Status and power are related, albeit distinct, constructs (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Status involves the esteem, prestige, and respect others confer, whereas power involves control over important resources (Blader & Chen, 2012). Individuals can have status without power, and vice-versa (Fast et al., 2012). Status and power are both important in the context of mistreatment in work teams, as they fundamentally influence behavior (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Although there are many forms of power (French & Raven, 1959), we focus on third-party power in general, given that a focus on all possible forms of power is beyond the scope of this research. Third parties with power are likely to perceive that their team members expect intervention, and that their response is likely to be salient.

Power refers to “an individual's relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments” (Keltner et al., 2003, p. 265). Third parties with power have action-related tendencies (Galinsky et al., 2003) that make them more goal-focused with little concern for interference or social consequences (Keltner et al., 2003). As such, third parties with power are better positioned to intervene in mistreatment (Hershcovis et al., 2017; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). As there is often an unequal distribution of power within

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teams (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), third parties with power are likely to believe that their team members expect intervention because they have power to address the mistreatment.

Third parties with power are also likely to perceive that their response will be more salient because they have discretion and latitude to require others to abide to their expectations (Keltner et al., 2003; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). A third party with power has significant freedom, which diminishes concerns of reprisals that may result from intervention (Keltner et al., 2003). Taken together, third parties with power are likely to perceive that their team members expect intervention, and expect that their response will be salient to their team members.

*Proposition 4a:* The third party's power is positively related to the third party's perception of their team members' expectation for their intervention.

*Proposition 4b:* The third party's power is positively related to their perception of the expected salience of their intervention or inaction to their team members.

### *Mistreatment Characteristics*

**Number of observers.** Situational characteristics of the mistreatment, such as the number of observers, can have a pervasive influence on a third party's decision-making process (Hegtvedt & Scheuerman, 2010). The number of observers refers to the number of individuals who directly observe the mistreatment. Bystander research indicates that the number of observers can significantly influence the decision to intervene (Fischer et al., 2011). We posit that the number of observers negatively relates to a third party's perception of their team members' expectation for their intervention, and differently relates to the third party's perception of the expected response salience to their team members depending on the nature of their response.

Mistreatment that is observed by a significant number of individuals diffuses beliefs of personal responsibility to address the situation (Latané & Darley, 1970; Latané & Nida, 1981). As such, incidents of mistreatment that involve many observers are likely to alleviate third-party

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perceptions that their team members expect them to intervene because the responsibility to address the mistreatment is shared by all observers.

The number of observers is likely to heighten a third party's perception that their response is likely to be salient to their team members, if the response is intervention. This is because a third party who intervenes is likely to garner significant attention by disrupting the status quo and the perpetrator-target dynamic (Hershcovis et al., 2017). Conversely, the number of observers is likely to foster perceptions that a response of inaction is likely much less salient because the responsibility to address the mistreatment is shared among observers (Latané & Darley, 1970; Latané & Nida, 1981). Thus, this makes an inaction response much less noticeable to their team members. In support, Barron and Yechiam (2002) found that requests for help elicited more support when sent to one specific email address rather than several email addresses, in that the responsibility to respond was diffused. This suggests that when there are many observers, third parties are likely to perceive that their inaction is less noticed given that the responsibility to intervene is shared. Altogether, the number of observers is negatively related to a third party's perception of their team members' expectations for intervention, and uniquely related to the third party's perception of the expected salience of their response: intervention may attract more attention from team members, while inaction may attract less attention.

*Proposition 5a:* The number of observers to the mistreatment is negatively related to the third party's perception of their team members' expectation for their intervention.

*Proposition 5b:* The number of observers to the mistreatment is positively related to the third party's perception of the expected salience of an intervention response, but is negatively related to an inaction response to their team members.

**Mistreatment intensity.** The situational nature of mistreatment also differs based on the intensity of the mistreatment (Barling, 1996). The intensity of mistreatment reflects a continuum ranging from low intensity (e.g., incivility) to high intensity (e.g., bullying) (Hershcovis, 2011).

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Intensity plays a central role in helping individuals determine whether an action constitutes mistreatment (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005) and whether a response is warranted (Harlos, 2010; Perry et al., 1997). We propose that the intensity of the mistreatment is positively related to a third party's perception of their team members' expectation for intervention, and their perception of the expected salience of their response.

Since the intensity of mistreatment influences the motivations and behaviors of third parties (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011), intense incidents of mistreatment have a positive effect on a third party's belief that their team members expect intervention (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). From a self-interest perspective, a third party is likely to believe that intense transgressions are salient to their team members, given that they are less ambiguous and likely to result in the belief that an injustice occurred (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005) considering the harm to the target (Magee et al., 2017). Thus, intense mistreatment is likely to lead to a third party's perceived expectation for intervention from their team members.

Intense incidents of mistreatment are further likely to lead third parties to perceive that their response will be salient to their team members (e.g., Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017). As the intensity of mistreatment becomes stronger, others are likely to attempt to make sense of the mistreatment (Ng et al., 2020), heightening the expected response salience. In sum, third parties who are exposed to intense mistreatment are likely to believe that their team members expect intervention, and that their response is likely to be salient to their team members.

*Proposition 6a:* The intensity of the mistreatment is positively related to the third party's perception of their team members' expectation for their intervention.

*Proposition 6b:* The intensity of the mistreatment is positively related to the third party's perception of the expected salience of their intervention or inaction to their team members.

### *Potential Interactions*

Although we identified specific relational and situational characteristics that are likely to influence third-party perceptions, we recognize there are a plethora of possible interactive effects between these characteristics. For example, a third party who has a strong justice reputation, high social status, and a close relationship with the target is particularly likely to perceive greater expectations for intervention compared to a third party who only has high social status. Despite these potential interactive effects, we limited our discussion to the direct effects for theoretical parsimony. Nonetheless, given the theoretical importance of these potential interactions, we discuss this as an important area for future research.

### **Third-Party Perceptions of Team Members' Expectations and their Response Salience**

The preceding discussion examined how characteristics of the third party and mistreatment influence third-party perceptions of their team members' expectation for intervention, and the perception of the expected salience of their response. We posit there is a natural link between these two concepts. A third party who believes their team members expect intervention is likely to perceive that their response will be salient to their team members because expectations usually result in greater attention. To illustrate, insights from impression management theory (Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Schlenker, 1980) suggest that third parties who believe their team members hold high expectations for their intervention are likely to perceive greater enhancements (or threats) to their image, which shows how expectations can make a response salient. That is, a third party who perceives their team members expect intervention are likely to believe that their team members will devote significant attention to their response to determine whether their expectations were met. Therefore, perceived expectations from team members heighten the perception of the expected response salience to these team members.



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*Proposition 7:* The third party's perception of their team members' expectation for their intervention is positively related to the third party's perception of the expected salience of their intervention or inaction to their team members.

We make the case that not all third parties who perceive expectations for intervention are equally likely to expect their response to be salient. Some third parties may expect their response to be more salient under certain organizational conditions, denoting the need to examine organizational-level moderators. As third-party decision-making about mistreatment occurs within the organizational context, organizational characteristics are likely to play an important role in the decision-making process (Craft, 2013; Mayer et al., 2013). Organizational characteristics can create a system of multiple reinforcing mechanisms that institutionalize (or fail to institutionalize) ethical principles that foster behavioral expectations (Sims, 1991). We posit that the relationship between a third party's perception of their team members' expectation for intervention and the expected salience of their response strengthens under an organizational backdrop of ethical leadership, ethical climate, and ethical HRM practices.

### *Organizational Characteristics*

**Ethical leadership.** Ethical leadership describes “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Ethical leadership is one of the most important sources of moral guidance in the workplace that affects employee cognitions (Moore et al., 2019). Building on this, third parties who perceive their team members expect intervention are likely to expect their response to be salient when there is strong ethical leadership in the organization.

Ethical leadership rests upon two pillars: leaders must be perceived as moral individuals and ‘moral managers’ (Brown et al., 2005). ‘Moral managers’ use their personal moral compass

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to model behaviors that specify appropriate conduct (Bai et al., 2019; Chiang & Birtch, 2013). As such, ethical leadership infuses principles and expectations through role modeling behaviors that shape how employees think (Jordan et al., 2013). Employees (including third parties) draw their attention to these behaviors as “leaders provide particularly salient cues regarding appropriate behavior” (Li et al., 2019, p. 371), affecting their own thoughts and behaviors (Bandura, 1986). This is because it creates an ethical context in which there is a shared expectation for ethical behaviors (Bedi et al., 2016). Thus, third parties who perceive expectations for intervention from their team members are likely to expect that their response will be salient in a backdrop of ethical leadership, as ethical leadership highlights ethically-focused standards (Treviño et al., 2006). Ethical leadership draws out more awareness of these perceived expectations, enhancing the expected response salience to their team members. In sum, ethical leadership moderates the relationship between third-party perceptions of expectations for intervention and their perceived response salience to their team members.

*Proposition 8:* Ethical leadership moderates the relationship between a third party’s perception of their team members’ expectation for intervention and their perception of their response salience to their team members, such that ethical leadership strengthens this relationship.

**Ethical climate.** An ethical climate describes an environment where there is a shared perception that practices, procedures, and policies comprise ethical content that embody ethical expectations (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Simply put, this climate characterizes a shared belief as to “what constitutes right behavior” (Martin & Cullen, 2006, p. 177). The critical role of ethical climate is supported by studies that show ethical climate affects employee cognitions (Otake-Ebede et al., 2020), such that it may influence decision-making processes (e.g., Treviño, 1986). Thus, an ethical climate positively moderates the relationship between third-party perceptions of expectations for intervention and the expected response salience to their team members.

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Research suggests that employees look to their work environment (e.g., organizational climate) to retrieve social cues to understand the behavioral expectations (Goldberg, Clark, & Henley, 2011; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). An ethical climate imbues ethically-focused behavioral expectations through ethically-grounded practices, procedures, and policies (Newman et al., 2017; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019). This social information cues behavioral expectations, which conveys expectations for ethical behavior (Mayer et al., 2010). As such, third parties who believe their team members expect them to intervene are likely to perceive heightened response salience, particularly when the organizational climate insinuates that intervention is expected. An ethical climate entails convergence on beliefs, norms, and values (Birtch & Chiang, 2014; Mayer et al., 2010), indicating that team members are attuned to third parties and their actions given that mistreatment violates behavioral expectations (Pearson et al., 2001; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019). In other words, an ethical climate draws out greater awareness to these expectations for intervention, which makes the third party believe their response is more salient to team members. Therefore, third-party perceptions of their team members' expectation for intervention are likely to enhance the expected response salience when there is a strong ethical climate.

*Proposition 9:* Ethical climate moderates the relationship between a third party's perception of their team members' expectation for intervention and their perception of their response salience to their team members, such that an ethical climate strengthens this relationship.

**Ethical HRM practices.** HRM practices play a critical role in curbing negative employee behaviors (Parboteeah et al., 2014). In particular, HRM practices that are ethically-focused influence how employees think about and respond to ethical situations (e.g., Beerli et al., 2013; McDonald, 2012). Thus, ethical HRM practices positively moderate the relationship between a third party's perception of their team members' expectation for intervention and their expected response salience to their team members.

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HRM practices can help organizations “build ethical environments inside and outside” (Shen & Zhu, 2011, p. 3031). In particular, ethically-focused HRM practices are critical to create an infrastructure where mistreatment is widely known to be unacceptable (Einarsen et al., 2019; Paull et al., 2020). To illustrate, reward systems (James, 2000), ethics-based training (Beeri et al., 2013), and grievance systems (McDonald, 2012) affect how employees think about how they should behave during cases of mistreatment. Thus, third parties who perceive expectations from their team members for intervention are likely to perceive greater response salience, especially when there is an organizational backdrop of ethical HRM practices that convey clear behavioral expectations (Veld et al., 2010). As these HRM practices lead to shared perceptions that indicate how employees are expected to respond to ethical issues (Shen & Zhu, 2011; Vranjes et al., 2021), these HRM practices are likely to draw greater awareness to their team members’ expectation for intervention, which makes third parties believe their response will be highly noted. Thus, ethical HRM practices moderate the effect of third-party perceptions of their team members’ expectation for intervention on their expected response salience.

*Proposition 10:* Ethical HRM practices moderate the relationship between a third party’s perception of their team members’ expectation for intervention and their perception of their response salience to their team members, such that ethical HRM practices strengthens this relationship.

### **Self-Interest Motivates the Cost-Benefit Analysis of Response Options**

When deciding how to respond to mistreatment, a third party has several possible response options, which fall into two main categories: inaction or intervention. Inaction involves a decision not to engage in behaviors to help resolve the mistreatment and involves no behavioral response (e.g., choosing not to help the target or report the incident) (Latané & Darley, 1970; McDonald et al., 2016). That is, this response option entails ‘doing nothing’ (O’Reilly & Aquino, 2011). Conversely, intervention refers to a third party’s decision to engage in behaviors

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directed at resolving the mistreatment to change the outcome (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). Although researchers have proposed several different theory-driven response options (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2011; Li et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2020; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Paull et al., 2020), we focus on intervention and inaction for theoretical parsimony. Because the level and immediacy of involvement applies to all responses, we provide some depth to the response options with an elaboration of the level of immediacy and involvement.

Intervention response options can be specified according to *when to intervene* (i.e., the level of immediacy) and *how to intervene* (i.e., the level of involvement). High-immediacy responses occur during mistreatment (e.g., breaking up a fight), whereas low-immediacy responses occur afterwards (e.g., reporting the incident days later). High-involvement responses occur when third parties become very involved (e.g., verbally intervening in a dispute), while low-involvement responses occur when third parties limit their involvement (e.g., offering support to the target afterwards) (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). These dimensions interact to pinpoint specific types of intervention behaviors, with the strongest response being 'high-immediacy—high-involvement' (e.g., immediate, public involvement in unfolding verbal altercation) and the weakest being 'low-immediacy—low-involvement' (e.g., reporting the incident afterwards). This elaboration underscores the reality that there are a host of possible responses for different types of mistreatment, and the costs and benefits differ greatly (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Goldberg et al., 2011).

Third parties seek to identify the (subjective) expected costs and benefits of intervention and inaction when deciding how to respond (Dovidio et al., 2017; Piliavin et al., 1981). To maximize their personal interests, third parties weigh these expected costs and benefits, which leads to intervention or inaction (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). This process is

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particularly important during mistreatment in work teams, given the potential significant costs and/or benefits (Jensen & Raver, 2021). To investigate this cost-benefit analysis, we draw insights from equity theory (Adams, 1965), which suggests that third parties consider their inputs (e.g., intervention) and outputs (e.g., expected costs and benefits) to determine how to respond.

**Expected costs and benefits from inaction.** Equity theory (Adams, 1965) suggests that third parties consider their inputs and outputs when evaluating inaction as a response. Inaction is a common reaction to witnessing workplace problems (e.g., Morrison & Milliken, 2000) as there are often few obstacles to doing nothing (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). Inaction is often preceded by a cost-benefit analysis, in that the costs are compared to the benefits (Kiewitz et al., 2016). Using equity theory and a self-interest lens, we propose that third parties who perceive their response to be highly salient to their team members are likely to perceive greater costs and fewer benefits from inaction. Third parties then determine which response best serves their interests by comparing inputs (e.g., inaction) and outcomes (e.g., restoring justice). When the costs of inaction outweigh the benefits, the third party is likely to intervene (which further implies that when the benefits of inaction outweigh the costs, the third party responds with inaction).

Salient situations garner considerable attention, and responses to mistreatment tend to be “morally salient” to others (Ng et al., 2020, p. 1728). Third parties who believe their response is likely to be salient are likely to perceive greater costs of inaction: because more team members are aware of their response, the potential costs appear much greater. Third parties who expect their response to elicit significant attention are likely to consider all potential sources (e.g., self, target, supervisor, coworkers) and types (e.g., reputation, relational) of costs for failing to act (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005). For example, costs of inaction include: resentment from the target, strained work relationships, the ascription of negative attributes, anxiety from not

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meeting expectations, guilt for not helping the target, and failing to resolve the mistreatment (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005; Dovidio et al., 2017; Goldberg et al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2016). On the other hand, third parties who perceive their response to be salient are likely to scan all possible sources and types of benefits of inaction, such as avoiding backlash from management (MacCurtain et al., 2018). Third parties are likely to anticipate that inaction carries few benefits, as it does not help to resolve the mistreatment. While inaction may carry some benefit (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2011), there are unlikely to be significant benefits where the third party’s response is salient. When team members are aware that the third party did not help to resolve the mistreatment, there is little to be gained from inaction.

Following the identification of the expected costs and benefits of inaction, third parties compare their inputs (i.e., inaction) with the expected outputs (i.e., costs, benefits) (Adams, 1965). When a self-interested third party perceives their response is salient to their team members, they are likely to believe that the costs of inaction are more impactful than the potential benefits. This is further supported by the negativity bias, in that negative information is more prominent than positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001): people tend to “give greater weight to negative entities (events, personal actions, or traits)... negative events can have consequences which far outweigh the consequences resulting from positive events of the same magnitude” (Palanski et al., 2014, p. 140). Thus, third parties are greatly affected by the costs of inaction, as these costs likely affect their personal interests. To illustrate, insights from impression management theory (Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Schlenker, 1980) suggest that threats to a third party’s image represent a significant cost of inaction, which motivates third parties to intervene to prevent image damage. Drawing upon signaling theory (Spence, 1973), we further suggest that third parties consider how their response may send signals: the third party’s response

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(e.g., inaction) may signal personal characteristics (e.g., lack of courage) to the receivers (e.g., team members) who interpret this signal and provide feedback (e.g., disapproval). This shows how high expected costs of inaction can motivate third-party intervention out of self-interest. In sum, third parties who perceive their response is salient to their team members are likely to perceive greater costs and fewer benefits of inaction. In turn, they are likely to perceive that the costs outweigh the benefits of inaction, leading to intervention.

*Proposition 11:* The third party's perception of the expected salience of their response to the mistreatment is positively related to the third party's perception of the expected costs from inaction, and is negatively related to the expected benefits from inaction.

*Proposition 12:* When the third party's perception of the expected costs from inaction outweigh the expected benefits, the third party is likely to engage in intervention (as opposed to inaction).

**Expected costs and benefits from intervention.** Drawing from equity theory (Adams, 1965), third parties compare their inputs and outputs when considering intervention response options that could help resolve the mistreatment. This decision relies on a comparison of the expected costs and benefits (Gundlach et al., 2003). Using equity theory and a self-interested lens, we propose that third parties who expect their response to be salient to their team members are likely to expect fewer costs and greater benefits from intervention. In turn, third parties compare these costs and benefits to select a response that serves their personal interests. When the expected benefits of intervention outweigh the costs, third parties are likely to intervene (which insinuates that a third party responds with inaction when the costs outweigh the benefits).

Third parties who perceive their response to be salient to their team members are likely to expect few costs from intervention, particularly because intervention helps to resolve the mistreatment (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Given that mistreatment is undesired (Dhanani et al., 2021), there are often significant efforts to minimize such behaviors (Hoel & Einarsen, 2010). As



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a result, third parties who attempt to resolve these problematic behaviors are likely to anticipate few costs as there are often multiple sources of support available to third parties who intervene (Paull et al., 2012). For example, a third party may expect backlash from the perpetrator, but is likely to expect counteractive support (e.g., HR/leader support), decreasing potential costs of intervention. Thus, third parties with expectations of a salient response are likely to expect few costs, such as limited concern for backlash and less stress from direct involvement in the mistreatment (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2011).

On the other hand, third parties who perceive their response to be salient are likely to perceive significant benefits from intervention because a greater awareness of their response insinuates a greater likelihood of benefits. Since the conferral of benefits is contingent on how others react to the third party's behavior (Stevens & Kristof, 1995) and intervention efforts are often favorably received by others (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011), salient intervention responses are likely to garner significant benefits from an array of sources. To illustrate, third parties may benefit from reduced cognitive dissonance, appreciation from the target, and praise from the organization (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). In addition, common benefits from intervention include: an enhanced work image, feeling positive, resolving the mistreatment, diminishing future mistreatment, and avoiding strained work relationships (e.g., Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Jensen & Raver, 2021). Thus, third parties who expect a salient response are likely to anticipate significant benefits from an array of sources (e.g., self, target, HR) for their attempts to resolve the mistreatment.

After third parties identify the expected costs and benefits of intervention, they compare their inputs (i.e., intervention) with the expected outputs (e.g., costs, benefits) (Adams, 1965). Third parties who believe the expected benefits outweigh the costs are likely to intervene, as

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these benefits serve their personal interests (Jensen & Raver, 2021). To illustrate, insights from impression management theory (Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Schlenker, 1980) suggest that the benefits associated with a positive image reflect a significant advantage of intervention, which motivates third-party intervention. Research on impression management (Bolino, 1999) further suggests that the projected image is more favorable when the expressive behaviors match the values and preferences of those who the third party wishes to influence. As expectations have a pervasive influence on behavior (Wong, 2019), third parties who expect that intervention generates significant benefits are likely to intervene to serve their personal interests. In sum, third parties who believe that their response is salient to their team members are likely to perceive few costs and significant benefits of intervention. As such, third parties are likely to believe the benefits of intervention outweigh its costs, which motivates intervention.

*Proposition 13:* The third party's perception of the expected salience of their response to the mistreatment is negatively related to the third party's perception of the expected costs from intervention, and positively related to the benefits from intervention.

*Proposition 14:* When the third party's perception of the expected benefits from intervention outweigh the expected costs, the third party is likely to engage in intervention (as opposed to inaction).

In sum, we assert that third parties consider both the benefits and costs of inaction and intervention when deciding how to respond to the mistreatment. As reasoned, third parties are likely to engage in intervention (as opposed to inaction) when they perceive that the costs outweigh the benefits of inaction, and/or when the benefits outweigh the costs of intervention. However, we recognize there may be some moderators that influence this cost-benefit analysis, ultimately affecting the third party's response to the mistreatment. Given that intervention from third parties is of particular importance (Rosander & Nielsen, 2021), we examine the influence of three critical moderators on the intervention decision: the probability that intervention alleviates

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the mistreatment, the perceived risk of intervention, and third-party vulnerability.

**The probability that intervention alleviates mistreatment.** When conducting the cost-benefit analysis, third parties are likely to consider whether their efforts are likely to make a positive impact on resolving the mistreatment. This factor is critical to the cost-benefit analysis because intervention attempts are not always successful (Wu & Wu, 2019), which influences expected costs and benefits. Thus, we propose that the probability that intervention alleviates the mistreatment moderates the effect of the third party's perception of the expected salience of their response to their team members on the expected costs and benefits from intervention.

Insights from motivation research on expectancy beliefs (Vroom, 1964) suggests the probability that intervention successfully resolves the mistreatment is likely to affect the decision to intervene (Morrison, 2011), as third parties want to ensure intervention “will be both effective and not too personally costly” (Morrison & Milliken, 2000, p. 707). The instrumental nature of this evaluation (Near & Miceli, 1985) points to important implications for how third parties evaluate the expected costs (e.g., retaliation) and benefits (e.g., cessation of wrongdoing) from intervention (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005). For example, Omari (2010) quotes a respondent who states: “in my experience, the managers... are generally primarily concerned with keeping the senior staff happy and new junior staff is largely expendable” (p. 357). In this case, the bystander did not intervene partly because they felt it would not resolve the problem (Paull et al., 2012). Furthermore, Fernando and Prasad (2019) find that third parties (e.g., HR, coworkers) often persuade victims to silence their experiences of sex-based harassment partly due to the possible negative repercussions, suggesting that third parties often consider the likelihood that intervention will be successful in their decision-making process. When there is a strong likelihood that intervention will help to resolve the mistreatment, third parties who expect

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their response to be salient are likely to expect fewer personal detriments and more personal benefits from intervention. In sum, third parties are likely to believe that their response salience draws out even fewer costs and more benefits as they expect to make meaningful strides to resolve the mistreatment when intervention is expected to alleviate the mistreatment.

*Proposition 15:* The probability that intervention alleviates the mistreatment moderates the relationship between the third party's perception of the expected salience of their response to the mistreatment and their perception of the expected costs and benefits from intervention. When intervention is likely to resolve the mistreatment, the relationships between expected salience and the costs (negative relationship) and benefits (positive relationship) of intervention are strengthened.

**The perceived risk of intervention.** The third party's cost-benefit analysis is further likely influenced by their perception of the risks associated with intervention. While some third parties may want to intervene, they may elect not to do so because of the potential risks (Near & Miceli, 1986). For instance, third parties can experience social (e.g., antisocial behaviors, harassment, ostracism) or work-related (e.g., demotion, poor performance appraisals, involuntary transfer) retaliation (Cortina & Magley, 2003). We therefore suggest that the perceived risk of intervention moderates the relationships between the third party's expectation about the salience of their response to their team members and the associated costs and benefits of intervention.

While intervention can be driven by positive intentions to resolve the mistreatment, there are inevitable risks that affect the expected costs and benefits. Third parties often account for the risks of intervention (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011), which largely stem from fears of negative consequences (Bjørkelo et al., 2011). For example, Lewis (2006) finds that nurses who observed bullying feared becoming a target and were concerned about potential negative career implications. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2016) reported that a public relations executive who witnessed an executive sexually harass another employee considered the expected repercussions for her career: "it would be political suicide if I complained about him" (para. 6). While third

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parties who believe their response will be salient are likely to perceive fewer costs and more benefits from intervention, these effects will be weakened when intervention carries significant risk given the potential negative repercussions. This weakens the third party's expectation that intervention carries fewer costs and more benefits when third parties perceive a risk of intervention (e.g., fear of ostracism from an angry high-status team member). In sum, while intervention is typically associated with fewer costs and greater benefits, these effects are weakened when third parties perceive there are risks associated with intervention.

*Proposition 16:* The perceived risk of intervention moderates the relationship between the third party's perception of the expected salience of their response to the mistreatment and their perception of the expected costs and benefits from intervention. When there is a perceived risk of intervention, the relationships between expected salience and the costs (negative relationship) and benefits (positive relationship) of intervention are weakened.

**Third-party vulnerability.** The cost-benefit analysis is further affected by the extent to which third parties are vulnerable, meaning that third parties perceive potential harm that can be difficult to address (Chambers, 2006). Importantly, third-party characteristics can influence the decision-making process (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019), with research suggesting that personal vulnerability can play a meaningful role (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). We suggest that the relationship between a third party's expected response salience to their team members and the expected costs and benefits from intervention are moderated by third-party vulnerability.

Individuals who are vulnerable are expected to be targets of harm (O'Connell & Korabik, 2000). For example, targets of sexual harassment are often vulnerable employees, such as young women and women with precarious employment contracts (McDonald, 2012). Insights from the vulnerable-victim hypothesis (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 2012) suggest that vulnerable employees are prone to be targets of negative actions. For example, Berdahl and Moore (2006) reveal that minority women are subject to the most harassment due to their dual status. We suggest that third

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parties who expect their response to be salient are likely to perceive fewer costs and more benefits from intervention, but these effects are weakened when third parties are vulnerable. To illustrate, a tenured professor (low vulnerability) who considers intervention expects very few costs and significant benefits because they perceive little potential harm from intervention given their protected position. As intervention is typically well-received, an untenured professor (high vulnerability) who considers intervention may still expect limited costs and more benefits, but these expectations are weakened as they perceive a greater likelihood of potential harm that they cannot address given their vulnerable position (e.g., ostracism from a long-standing tenured faculty member). In sum, third-party vulnerability shapes the relationship between their expected response salience and the costs and benefits from intervention.

*Proposition 17:* Third-party vulnerability moderates the relationship between the third party's perception of the expected salience of their response to the mistreatment and their perception of the expected costs and benefits from intervention. When a third party is vulnerable, the relationships between expected salience and the costs (negative relationship) and benefits (positive relationship) of intervention are weakened.

### **Discussion**

There is a particularly dire need to understand what motivates third-party responses to mistreatment, given its widespread prevalence (Dhanani et al., 2021). We contribute to this conversation with a process-based conceptual model that investigates how a third party's self-interest can influence their reactions to mistreatment in work teams. We argue that several relational and situational factors have a key influence on a third party's perception of the extent to which their team members expect intervention, and their perception of the expected salience of their response to their team members. We further propose that organizational characteristics strengthen the perceived expectations and response salience relationship. This response salience affects the expected costs and benefits from inaction and intervention, which is moderated by

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several key factors. In turn, third parties make the decision to intervene if it serves their interests. This research does not discount the role of other motivations in shaping third-party responses, but suggests an in-depth examination of the self-interest perspective offers a promising account of an under-researched motivation that underlies third-party reactions.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This paper makes three key contributions with important implications for HRM research. First, most research has explored third-party reactions from a moral perspective (e.g., O'Reilly et al., 2016), which has resulted in important implications for HRM research (Einarsen et al., 2019). Building on this, we contend that a self-interest lens is needed to offer new insights to illuminate why self-interest motivates intervention. In response to a call for research on third-party intervention decisions (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019), we elaborate a process-based self-interest lens to third-party intervention during mistreatment in work teams. We propose that third parties are motivated to intervene if they believe the benefits of intervention outweigh its costs, and/or when the costs of inaction outweigh its benefits. This self-interest lens sheds important, much-needed insight into why some third parties do not intervene: when the benefits of inaction exceed the costs of inaction, and/or when the costs of intervention exceed its benefits. In these cases, intervention fails to serve the third party's interests. Importantly, we advance HRM research by suggesting that some third parties may be predominantly motivated by personal interests (as opposed to being morally motivated). This is important because much of the HRM dialogue focuses on how creating HR systems can encourage specific behaviors that help to thwart mistreatment (e.g., Guerci et al., 2017), but this assumes that employees will do the 'right thing' if educated (Salin et al., 2020). However, we propose that HRM research must recognize that some parties may choose (not) to intervene out of self-interest (even if educated), which reflects

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a critical first step to understand when thinking about how HR can address mistreatment.

Second, most of the research that offers insight into individual-level (i.e., relational, situational) characteristics that influence third-party intervention is grounded within a moral lens. We advance extant research by delineating relational and situational characteristics that shape the decision-making process grounded in the personal interests of third parties. A third party with a justice reputation, high social status, high-quality relationship with the target, and significant power is likely to believe that their team members expect intervention and that their response will be salient to these team members. We further propose that the number of observers and intensity of mistreatment influences third-party perceptions of expectations for intervention and the expected response salience to their team members. From a self-interest lens, our elaboration of these relational and situational factors advances our understanding of *when* and *which* third parties may intervene in mistreatment out of self-interest. This elaboration deepens HRM research that seeks to identify employees who may serve as ‘ethical champions’ (Chen et al., 2020), in that employees with the aforementioned characteristics may serve as ethical champions where they help to uphold ethically-focused behavioral expectations. Research further reveals that HR professionals seem to favor a ‘strategic partner’ role when addressing mistreatment (Salin et al., 2020), but we suggest that different approaches (such as emphasizing employees who can be ethical champions) may offer a more comprehensive way to address mistreatment.

Building on this, we offer a greater contextual understanding of the third-party decision-making process by accounting for the role of three organizational factors: ethical leadership, ethical climate, and ethical HRM practices. We propose that these factors strengthen the positive relationship between a third party’s perceived expectations and their expected response salience. Our analysis reveals that these key organizational characteristics further motivate self-interested



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third parties to intervene in mistreatment, which contributes to concerns that little attention has been devoted towards the work context of mistreatment (Hershcovis et al., 2020). HRM research largely focuses on how HRM practices elicit the support of third parties to curb mistreatment (Salin et al., 2020), but we highlight the importance of considering multiple organizational factors (beyond HRM practices) to support third-party intervention from a self-interest lens.

Third, we posit that self-interested third parties undertake a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether intervention is expected to benefit them. Third parties account for the expected costs and benefits of intervention and inaction to identify the option that best serves their self-interest, which may (not) lead to intervention. We extend this cost-benefit analysis with more nuanced insights into the intervention response, given the importance of third-party intervention (Reich & Dhensa-Kahlon, 2022). We suggest that three moderators (probability that intervention alleviates the mistreatment, perceived risk of intervention, third-party vulnerability) are critical factors that influence the expected costs and benefits of intervention. While perceived risks of intervention and third-party vulnerability ultimately decrease the likelihood of intervention, third party beliefs that intervention alleviates mistreatment ultimately increases the likelihood of intervention. This elaborated cost-benefit analysis has critical implications for HRM research that focuses on interventions. As alluded, research suggests that HR interventions should be education-focused (Salin et al., 2020), but this seems to assume that third parties will intervene if educated. However, we suggest that education-focused interventions should integrate specific elements (e.g., discussion of the significant benefits and limited costs of grievance procedures; support and protection for intervention from HR) to encourage intervention from self-interested third parties.

### **Practical Implications**

Organizations must actively address mistreatment (Dhanani et al., 2021) because failure to do so can result in harmful spirals (Jex et al., 2010). To begin, managers serve as a key source of behavioral guidance (Schaubroeck et al., 2012), which implies they must model the expected behaviors. Managers must ‘walk the talk’ by actively intervening in mistreatment, which can help encourage third-party intervention (Brown et al., 2005). Managers must also create a climate that fosters respect and dignity with zero tolerance for mistreatment. An ethical climate that fosters a shared belief as to the expected ethical behaviors (Martin & Cullen, 2006) should be created, and spearheaded by senior leaders (Shin, 2012).

HRM practices further have an important role in addressing mistreatment to encourage third-party intervention. Training research suggests mandatory training programs should be implemented to communicate the importance of respectful interactions (Walsh & Magley, 2020). For example, program elements should include: a zero tolerance policy for mistreatment, awareness of common mistreatment behaviors, suitable intervention behaviors, and available formal procedures to address the mistreatment. From a rewards perspective, there is a need to understand that third parties can be driven by a range of motives, including the need for personal benefit. Managers and HR professionals should not only communicate that employees are expected to address mistreatment in their work teams, but should reward intervention efforts through carefully designed systems to avoid unintentionally encouraging unethical behavior (Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014). Since employees learn from positive reinforcement (Bandura, 1986), meaningful rewards can help encourage intervention from those motivated by self-interest. All HRM practices should be reviewed further to reduce structural (e.g., HRM practices that condone, bury, or make room for mistreatment) (D’Cruz et al., 2014) and social (e.g., fear of

reprisal) (McDonald, 2012) costs of intervention to encourage third-party intervention. Taken together, the organizational system, with support from managers and HR professionals, must be designed to support third-party intervention.

### **Directions for Future Research**

To begin, we encourage future research to explore how self-interest can interact with moral motivations to offer a more complete account of the motivations underlying third-party responses to mistreatment. Beyond this, there is a need to understand the conditions under which specific motivations, such as self-interest, become particularly influential in fostering third-party intervention. Potential boundary conditions include: moral identity (Greenbaum et al., 2013), narcissism (Chen et al., 2013), and conscientiousness (Mawritz et al., 2014). Given that person-related factors can interact with situational factors to affect decision-making processes (Treviño, 1986), we encourage future research to investigate whether situational factors enhance or inhibit the effects of the relational factors. Similarly, future research should explore the potential interactive effects between the antecedent variables (e.g., status, power). In particular, future research is encouraged to delve more deeply into the potential differential effects of several forms of third-party power (French & Raven, 1959) on perceived expectations from team members. While we framed team member expectations to include target expectations, future research should parse out target expectations from other team member expectations for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of these expectations on third-party decision-making.

Building on this, additional boundary conditions of the third party's cost-benefit analysis should be explored. Our model accounts for the downstream implications of antecedent factors (e.g., intense mistreatment may affect perceived expectations for intervention and their response salience, which influences the expected costs and benefits of their response). However, some of

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the identified antecedents may also directly moderate the third party's cost-benefit analysis (e.g., intense mistreatment may have a more proximate influence on the expected costs and benefits). In addition, we recommend future research to explore the distinct cost-benefit implications of specific response options (e.g., direct involvement in the mistreatment, reporting the response through grievance procedures, helping the victim report the mistreatment) to specific types of mistreatment.

Importantly, although we proposed direct effects, future research should empirically examine whether the theorized relationships may be partially mediated. Several different methodologies (e.g., surveys, experiments) may be used to help capture this complexity of organizational life. In addition, future research should examine the cultural implications associated with self-interested third parties, given that national and cultural influences may shape such motivations (Miller, 1999). There is also an important opportunity for researchers to explore how the anticipation of emotions can influence third-party intervention. For example, what types of emotions (positive or negative) are particularly instrumental in fostering intervention? Which third parties are most likely to be influenced by the anticipation of emotions? Lastly, future research should examine how third-party decision-making may unfold when the mistreatment takes place in a public domain (e.g., in front of customers).

In sum, there are several important avenues for future research within this literature, which will hopefully result in more significant and much-needed insights into this literature, which has meaningful implications for HRM research and professionals.

### **Data Availability Statement**

Data sharing is not applicable to this article. No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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**Figure 1: The Influence of Self-Interest  
on Third-Party Intervention during Mistreatment in Work Teams**

