

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perceived organizational exploitation and employee health: An examination of processes and boundary conditions

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Abstract

Recent research has argued that exploitative working relationships can be present in any context and experienced by any employee, and their forms can range from extreme to subtle. Drawing on the Conservation of Resources theory, we argue that, through the depletion of resources, employees' perceived organizational exploitation is likely to affect their emotions, cognition and motivation, with subsequent effects on their physical and psychological health. Moreover, we suggest that coworker support serves as a critical boundary condition to alleviate the negative effects of perceived exploitation. Specifically, we propose that inward-focused negative emotions, rumination and thwarted psychological needs are intertwined mechanisms that link perceived exploitation to health-related outcomes. Using an experiment and a multi-wave field study, we demonstrated that employees' perceptions of organizational exploitation predicted their negative emotions, rumination and thwarted psychological needs. We also found that the perception of exploitation had direct and indirect effects on employees' health. Furthermore, our findings revealed that emotional and motivational pathways mediated the relationship between workers' perceived exploitation and depressive symptoms, while cognitive and motivational pathways mediated the relationship between their perceived exploitation and somatic complaints. Finally, rather than neutralizing the negative effect of perceived exploitation, coworker support was found to have amplifying effects.

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KEYWORDS

coworker support, health outcomes, mechanisms, perceived exploitation

Practitioner points

- Organizations and managers should be aware of the deleterious consequences that employees' perception of exploitation exerts on their physical and mental health.
- Coworker support may not be enough to neutralize the negative impact that perceived exploitation has on workers because its effect is amplifying.
- Organizations and managers should take action and diagnose the state of their employee-organization relationships in an effort to avert employees' rumination, unsatisfied needs and negative emotions.

INTRODUCTION

Although unemployment rates have maintained an all-time global low since 2000, deficits in decent work prevail, as is evidenced by the alarming worldwide deterioration of fundamental labor rights (International Labour Organization, 2024), in Europe as well as the Americas (International Trade Union Confederation, 2025). Labor exploitation and modern slavery comprise forced labor, human trafficking, slavery and servitude (Cooper et al., 2017; International Labour Organization, 2022), which capture severe forms of exploitation. Such severe forms are at one end of the exploitation continuum and are publicly and widely denounced. At the other end, more subtle forms (e.g. normalized low pay and precarious work conditions and practices) may be more predominant and accepted (Kim et al., 2020; Lewis & Waite, 2015; Stanley & Kay, 2024).

Much of the empirical research on employee exploitation has focused primarily on migrants, highlighting how they experience exploitation and its consequences. For instance, Potter and Hamilton (2014) reported that the exploitation of mushroom pickers in Northern Ireland led to health-related problems, such as nausea, headaches, back pain, breathing difficulties and fatigue. More recently, Boufkhed (2020) described how Latin American migrants in the UK experienced physical and mental problems triggered by exploitative working conditions. Portes-Virginio et al. (2023) defined 'super-exploitation' as the 'economic and non-economic forces that entangle productive-reproductive-exploitative relationships, thereby shaping the dependence of workers' (p. 897) to describe the experiences of Haitian workers in Brazil. This strand of research highlights the negative impact of extreme forms of exploitation on health outcomes for migrant workers.

However, less empirical evidence exists on the more subtle forms of exploitation and their impact on employee health in contemporary and conventional organizations. In this context, individual employees may experience and interpret subtle forms of exploitation differently, thus emphasizing the relevance of their subjective perception. Perceived organizational exploitation is defined as 'employees' perceptions that they have been purposefully taken advantage of in their relationship with the organization, to the benefit of the organization itself' (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019, p. 1993). Currently, the limited empirical evidence suggests that employees' perceptions of organizational exploitation lead to negative emotions, which in turn negatively impact their attitudes toward the organization (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019).

Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001), our paper makes the following contributions. First, we extend the application of COR theory and, in turn, offer a different theoretical lens to Social Exchange theory as a way to understand employee experiences of exploitation. Second, we expand the explanatory mechanisms beyond emotions, to account for the perceived

exploitation–outcome link. Third, we uncover additional outcomes of perceived exploitation, beyond organization-related outcomes, to include detrimental health outcomes (i.e. depressive symptoms and somatic complaints). Finally, we explore the buffering effect of relational resources (coworker support) on the relationship between perceived exploitation and health outcomes. Overall, we advance understanding on how and why employee perceptions of organizational exploitation have deleterious effects on psychological and physical health outcomes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Perceived organizational exploitation as a trigger of resource loss

Conservation of Resources theory posits that people strive to obtain, retain, protect and build resources that are highly valued (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Moreover, when individuals' resources are lost, threatened or unavailable despite significant personal investment, they are likely to experience stress (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Consequently, in light of COR theory, perceived organizational exploitation can be conceptualized as employees' subjective appraisal that the resources they invest (e.g. their time, energy, effort and skills) are being used (or misused) by the organization without reciprocal gain. Specifically, it is the resource loss inherent in the experience of exploitation (i.e. how employees perceive exploitation by their organization) that has the potential to lead to a health-impairment process. In fact, COR theory argues that (potential or actual) resource loss makes individuals more prone to further losses, especially if they lack additional resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Herein lies the notion of a resource-loss cycle, in which 'resource loss is more powerful than resource gain, and because stress occurs when resources are lost, at each iteration of the stress spiral individuals and organizations have fewer resources to offset resource loss, and these loss spirals gain in momentum as well as magnitude' (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 106). Employees who perceive that they are being exploited by their organization are likely to enter a loss spiral that increases in magnitude with each interaction they have with the organization, primarily because the organization is, in effect, repeatedly taking advantage of the employees' time, energy, personal situation, effort and skills.

COR theory proposes that there are different kinds of resources, such as object resources (e.g. work tools), condition resources (e.g. employment contracts), personal resources (e.g. skills and traits) and energy resources (e.g. money) that allow individuals to better cope and deal with challenging conditions (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Perceived organizational exploitation represents an active source of resource depletion with the potential to deplete employees' cognitive, emotional and/or motivational resources. Through the depletion of their resources, individuals who feel exploited are likely to feel and display more inward-focused negative emotions, ruminate about their employment situation and feel that their needs are being thwarted. This response to resource depletion is consistent with the 'resource caravan passageways' principle (Hobfoll et al., 2018), which maintains that individuals' resources exist in ecological conditions that can either promote and build or undermine and obstruct resource generation and sustenance (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Through conditions that are perceived as exploitative, organizations undermine and erode employees' resource reservoirs, with deleterious consequences for their health.

Depletion of emotional, cognitive and motivational resources

Inspired by the recently described toxic work climate framework (Priesemuth & Schminke, 2024), which links toxic work climates to outcomes via emotions, cognitions and motivation, and following the tenets from COR (Hobfoll et al., 2018), we propose that perceived organizational exploitation depletes employees' emotional, cognitive and motivational resources and that depletion subsequently affects the employees' health. Individuals tend to invest resources in order to protect certain other valued resources

against potential losses (Hobfoll et al., 2018). However, that investment is only effective when the ecological context (i.e. the organization) nurtures and fosters the employee-organization relationship and its associated resources. We will explain how perceived organizational exploitation is related to negative emotions, rumination and thwarted psychological needs.

Emotional resources

Negative experiences induce negative emotional reactions (Taylor, 1991). When employees believe that their organization is exploiting them by providing inadequate compensation, requiring long hours or otherwise taking advantage, this negative experience at work leads to acute and negative emotional responses (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019). According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), individuals are more affected by resource losses than they are by equivalent gains. Thus, perceived organizational exploitation is likely to lead to a significant loss of employees' emotional resources, thereby impeding their emotional regulation. Moreover, because loss is experienced intensely, negative emotions are more likely to be felt and displayed.

Livne-Ofer et al. (2019) examined the emotional mechanisms that underlie the consequences of perceived exploitation and found that perceptions of organizational exploitation elicited both inward-focused negative emotions (e.g. shame and guilt) and outward-focused negative emotions (e.g. anger and hostility). Their study also demonstrated that the inward-focused emotions were more likely to lead to outcomes directed at the self (e.g. burnout), whereas the outward-focused emotions were more likely to result in outcomes directed at the organization (e.g. turnover intentions). Building on this distinction, the present study focused specifically on inward-focused emotions that derive from perceived exploitation, because such emotions are more likely to be internalized and to contribute to impaired employee health (Consedine & Moskowitz, 2007). In contrast, although outward-focused emotions have also been linked to impaired physical health, they tend to be short-lived and externalized toward removing the threat, which may provide some psychological relief from the distress caused by the perceived organizational exploitation (Consedine & Moskowitz, 2007; Livne-Ofer et al., 2019). Moreover, studies on emotions have shown that outward emotions such as anger and fear prepare the person to attack an obstacle or to flee a danger (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Lazarus et al., 1980), which is unlikely to happen when individuals are in an exploitative employment relationship, given their lack of resources to respond. On the other hand, shame and guilt motivate individuals to adhere to social norms and behave according to what is expected, in the belief that they are perpetuating the situation, which minimizes the likelihood of prompting a negative behavioural reaction (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988) but may increase their mental and psychological burden.

Drawing from COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), shame and guilt are emotional signals of internal resource deficits, and they capture a discrepancy between the ideal self and the real one (Lewis, 1971)—a common occurrence in situations in which the individual is victimized and has no means to avoid it (Gilligan, 2003). Indeed, shame and guilt are two emotions commonly felt when individuals are in powerless and vulnerable situations (Skinner, 1996), characteristic of exploitative work environments. Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1. Employees' perceptions of organizational exploitation are positively related to inward-focused negative emotions.

Cognitive resources

Individuals who perceive that they are being exploited by their organization are more likely to think about the situation frequently because they are concerned with work events and interactions (Demsky et al., 2019). Individuals are particularly likely to engage in sense-making in response to unexpected, negative events (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1981; Wong & Weiner, 1981) or when they feel harmed by their

organization (Cole et al., 2010; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). Following COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), rumination happens primarily because employees focus on resource loss, and the attention that they give to the state of their employment relationship may drain their resources further. In this light, rumination reflects a cognitive resource loss, with employees mentally revisiting their adverse work experiences. Rumination is therefore resource-depleting (Hobfoll, 1989; Qian et al., 2024) because individuals cannot move forward or find a way to solve the problem that they are dwelling on. Consequently, perceived exploitation is a stressor that triggers prolonged or repetitive thoughts about one's current employment situation, in an attempt to make sense of it and to regain control over one's resources. Empirical evidence supports the contention that mistreatment can lead to employee rumination (Baranik et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018). We therefore hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2. Employees' perceptions of organizational exploitation are positively related to their rumination.

Motivational resources

Basic psychological needs are psychological resources that underlie human motivation and are essential for an individual's adjustment and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000); according to Self-Determination theory, these resources include autonomy, relatedness and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the context of COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), when employees find themselves in exploitative working relationships, they are likely to perceive that their psychological resources are under threat, diminished or even lost. This resource loss undermines employees' motivation, because thwarted basic psychological needs represent a significant depletion of essential resources that employees need to support their ability to cope and protect themselves from further losses. Specifically, when individuals perceive organizational exploitation, they may experience limited control over the structure of their work, the pace of their work (e.g. working hours) and/or the outcomes of their efforts (e.g. their salary and benefits) (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019). In turn, this lack of control can result in a perceived loss of autonomy. Relatedness can also be affected as employees feel that the organization does not care about them and treats them as a disposable resource. In such cases, employees will be unlikely to reciprocate with prosocial behaviours, identify with or feel attached to their organization (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2025). This lack of connection and belongingness (or unrelatedness) is likely to result in a loss of social resources, such as a reduction in access to social networks, meaningful social connections and social support. Finally, exploitative organizations are likely to overuse and/or abuse the competence of their employees to meet their organizational objectives, while they simultaneously fail to provide opportunities for their employees to develop and expand their own knowledge, abilities and skills. In such contexts, employees' contributions may be overutilized or appropriated without recognition or reward, and that exploitation ultimately undermines the fulfilment of their psychological need for competence.

Hypothesis 3. Employees' perceptions of organizational exploitation are positively related to their thwarted psychological needs.

Effects of perceived exploitation on employees' health

Because perceived organizational exploitation exerts a strong and repeated pressure on an individual's resources, potentially leading to depletion of emotional, cognitive and motivational resources, it is also likely to trigger health-related problems. This happens because individuals fail to gain resources following their investment of time, energy, situation, effort and skills (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In exploitative situations, individuals' losses of personal resources are likely to precede health-related problems, such as depressive symptoms and somatic complaints. COR theory argues that health issues may arise when

individuals lose their cognitive, emotional, energy and physical resources following a prolonged experience of stress at work. Moreover, when their resources are depleted, individuals adopt a defensive mode to preserve the self (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The defensive mode is triggered to preserve the remaining resources and to strategically decide where to invest those few remaining resources (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018). In these circumstances, the perception of exploitation will precipitate a low resource availability that impairs employee health and functioning.

Drawing on these theoretical arguments, employees' perceptions of exploitation are likely to generate depressive symptoms and somatic complaints because they deplete an individual's personal resources while limiting the possibility of acquiring new ones. Negative emotions arising from perceptions of exploitation may in turn produce a more pessimistic view of events and lead to depressive moods, lack of energy or emotional exhaustion (Petzke et al., 2024).

Employees who ruminate as a response to stressful events, such as being exploited at work, focus on their experience of exploitation means and continuously revisit the toxic nature of their employment relationship. This, in turn, increases their risk of depressive symptoms. In addition, rumination activates the body's stress responses in the same way that other stressors do—by triggering sleep issues, pain, addictive behaviours and illness (e.g. Cropley et al., 2012; Suris & Parera, 2005).

Finally, by depleting the basic psychological resources that underlie an individual's capacity for the motivation needed to cope with stressful work situations (Hobfoll et al., 2018), perceived organizational exploitation is likely to generate feelings of low energy that are characteristic of depressive symptoms (Bohannon et al., 2003). In this situation, prior research has demonstrated the importance of satisfying one's psychological needs for autonomy, competence and belongingness in order to minimize depressive symptoms (Martela et al., 2023). Based on these theoretical arguments and empirical findings, we propose that perceived exploitation affects health via three pathways:

Hypothesis 4. Employees' inward-focused negative emotions (a), rumination (b), and thwarted psychological needs (c) will mediate the relationship between their perceptions of exploitation and their depressive symptoms.

Hypothesis 5. Employees' inward-focused negative emotions (a), rumination (b), and thwarted psychological needs (c) will mediate the relationship between their perceptions of organizational exploitation and their somatic complaints.

Coworker support as a relational resource

The principles of COR theory further suggest that employees' responses to conditions that deplete their resources may vary with the strength of the challenges or obstacles that they perceive they are facing (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). As a specific example, the intensity of their response may be mitigated if they can mobilize critical resources that protect them from additional losses. COR theory argues that individuals utilize their resources to cope with pressures from their environment (Hobfoll (1989, 2011)—for instance, under stressful work conditions, employees may look for support and emotional assurance from coworkers, spouses or friends. We suggest specifically that relational resources, such as coworker support, may diminish the impact that employees' perceived exploitation has on their individual resources. Coworker support is defined as the degree to which employees perceive their colleagues to be reliable sources of support and assistance during work-related challenges (Thoits, 2011). If employees have supportive coworkers, this relational resource may not only dampen the impact of negative situations; it may also prevent further resource depletion.

Notably, support from coworkers is one of the key resources mapped by Hobfoll (1989, 2001) with implications for employees' health (Rousseau et al., 2009). In fact, when stressful conditions are prolonged (such as with an ongoing exploitative work relationship), the health benefits of social support remain strong (Hobfoll et al., 2012). Coworker support has the potential to reduce psychological distress

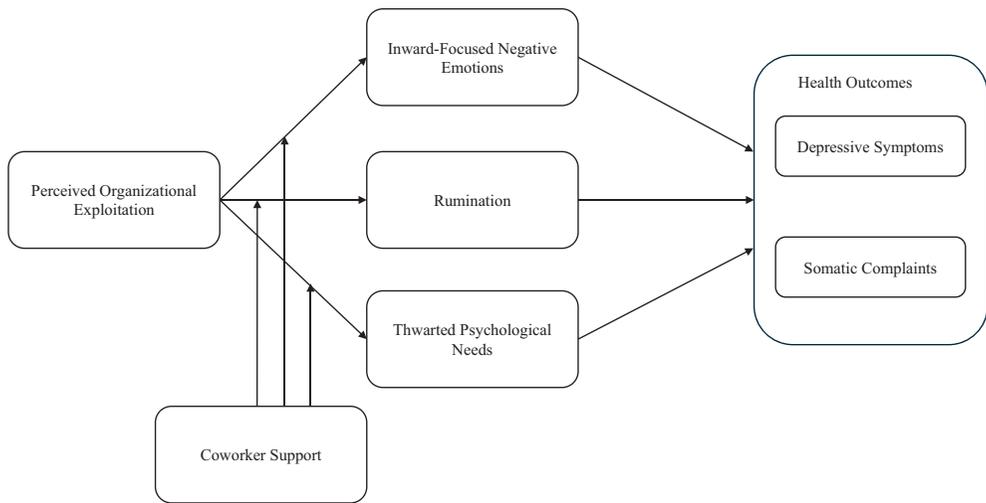


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

stemming from an exploitative work relationship and to minimize the negative consequences associated with that distress; therefore, improving employees' ability to deal with organizational challenges (Rousseau et al., 2009). Indeed, coworker support may protect employees' cognitive, emotional and motivational resources from depletion, thus protecting their health. Coworker support is especially relevant in an exploitative work context because employees share their experiences with each other, and these interactions may strengthen employees' capacity to face a difficult situation and cope with it (Thoits, 2011).

Hypothesis 6. The conditional indirect effect of employees' perceived exploitation on their depressive symptoms via inward-focused negative emotions (a), rumination (b), and thwarted psychological needs (c) will be weaker when coworker support is high than when it is low.

Hypothesis 7. The conditional indirect effect of employees' perceived exploitation on their somatic complaints via inward-focused negative emotions (a), rumination (b), and thwarted psychological needs (c) will be weaker when coworker support is high than when it is low (Figure 1).

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two studies, both of which received ethical approval from the University Ethical Committee of the first author's university. In Study 1, we used an experimental vignette methodology (EVM), designing an experiment in which we manipulated the variable of interest (i.e. perceived exploitation) via three realistic scenarios, following the EVM recommendations of Aguinis and Bradley (2014). We then asked participants to rate the extent to which their perception of exploitation affected their emotions, cognition and motivation. Specifically, in Study 1, we developed scenarios capturing the participants' levels of perceived organizational exploitation (measured at three levels: an absence or zero level, a medium level and a high level of perceived exploitation), for two primary reasons. First, we sought to check whether the frequency and intensity of perceived exploitation had an impact on outcomes, and second, we wanted to use a more complex design and test the robustness and accuracy of the manipulations and effects (Schwab et al., 2023). These experiments allowed us

to establish causality and advance the internal validity of our hypothesized model. In Study 1, we tested Hypotheses 1–3. However, while such experiments provided insights into the causality of relationships, they also raised concerns about external validity and the generalizability of the findings to the real world (Colquitt, 2008).

Consequently, in Study 2, we addressed those limitations by employing a multi-wave field study to examine and conceptually expand our model by assessing the effects of employees' perceived exploitation on their health-related outcomes. This type of design enhances ecological validity by capturing relationships over time and reducing concerns about common method bias (CMB) (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Together, the two studies provide a balance between internal and external validity, strengthen the robustness of our findings and increase confidence in our conclusions (Aguinis & Edwards, 2014).

STUDY 1 METHODS

Procedures and sample

Study 1 was a between-subjects scenario experiment. Participants were recruited through Prolific Ltd. and were randomly assigned to one of three manipulated conditions. First, the participants answered demographic questions and were then presented with a scenario in which we manipulated perceived exploitation at three levels: high-exploitative, medium-exploitative and non-exploitative conditions. The participants were asked to rate their perceived level of exploitation and the extent to which they believed such exploitation could happen in the real world. Next, we asked them to answer the questions as if they were experiencing that situation. Then, upon completion of their involvement, we thanked the participants for their time and compensated them. Participants took an average of 8.79 min ($SD = 4.77$) to complete this study.

A total of 179 participants completed Study 1. We removed participants who did not finish the survey, failed the attention check (i.e. did not correctly name the organization presented in the scenario) or were not working. After that process, the final sample was comprised of 158 participants who were working in the United Kingdom (females = 49.4%, males = 50.0%, others = 0.6%) and whose average age was 38.25 years ($SD = 11.38$). At the time of the study, the participants were employed either full-time (81.6%) or part-time (18.4%). The largest number (39.8%) had a bachelor's degree, while 22.2% had a master's degree, 5.7% held a doctorate or other professional degree, 6.3% had earned an associate's degree, 15.8% had attended college but had no degree, 10.1% had completed high school or its equivalent and 1.9% had less than a high school diploma.

Manipulations

In this study, we created three scenarios representing three levels of organizational exploitation: the absence of exploitation (non-exploitative), a medium level of exploitation and a high level of exploitation. Each scenario included a brief description of a job from the employees' point of view, with the focus primarily on their relationship with their employer. We based our scenarios on the conceptualization and instrument proposed by Livne-Ofer et al. (2019). We include an example of the differences between the scenarios in Table 1. While the items were adapted for the narrative in the scenarios, the original unaltered scale developed by Livne-Ofer et al. (2019) was used to measure the participants' perceived level of organizational exploitation (see Study 1—Measures section).

Measures

Participants' responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale unless stated otherwise.

TABLE 1 Example of differences between scenarios.

Original scale items (Ofer-Livne et al., 2019)	Levels of perceived exploitation		
	High	Medium	Non-exploitative
<i>Example 1:</i> My organization uses my ideas for its personal benefit without acknowledging me for them	Your ideas, work and general well-being are a resource your organization feels entitled to without giving you commensurate benefits (...)	Sporadically, your ideas and work are also used by your superiors without giving you commensurate benefits or credit (...)	You get credited for your ideas and hard work (...)
<i>Example 2:</i> My organization doesn't care if it harms me, as long as it benefits from my work	As long as you go there to work, the organization doesn't give a second thought about harming you or your general well-being – you are just a number to them	You sometimes feel like your organization doesn't give a second thought about harming you or your general well-being – as if you were just a number to them	When you think about the relationship with your employer, you think that they support you and pay attention to your needs and wellbeing

Perceived exploitation

Perceived exploitation was measured using a 14-item scale for perceived exploitation (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019). A sample item is 'My organization takes advantage of the fact that I need this job'. The Cronbach's alpha value for this measure was .99, and the response scale ranged from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'.

Inward-focused negative emotions

Inward-focused negative emotions were measured using two items, one capturing shame and the other guilt. Participants were asked to rate how often they felt ashamed and how often they felt guilty. Single-item measures of such discrete emotions offer greater ease of comprehension for participants and provide a more direct representation of the intended emotional construct (Gabriel et al., 2019). The Cronbach's alpha value for these emotions was .74, and the response scale ranged from 'Never felt this way' to 'Feel this way every day'.

Rumination

Rumination was measured using a four-item scale (Garnefski et al., 2001). A sample item is 'I often think about how I feel about what I experience at work'. The Cronbach's alpha was .81, and the response scale ranged from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'.

Thwarted psychological needs at work

Participants' thwarted psychological needs were measured using a nine-item scale from the research of Gillet et al. (2012). A sample item is 'I feel forced to follow work decisions made for me'. The Cronbach's alpha was .96, and the response scale ranged from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'.

TABLE 2 Study 1: descriptive statistics and correlations.

Variable	<i>M</i> (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived exploitation	4.46 (2.27)	-				
2. Inward-focused NE	3.11 (1.60)	.59*	-			
3. Rumination	4.47 (1.41)	.63*	.52*	-		
4. Thwarted psychological needs	4.24 (1.75)	.79*	.69*	.75*	-	
5. Gender	—	-.04	.01	.04	-.03	-
6. Age	38.05 (12.60)	.04	-.09	.04	-.03	-.12

Note: Given the non-normal distribution of the data, the table displays Spearman's rho correlations.

Abbreviation: NE, negative emotions.

* $p < .01$.

STUDY 1 RESULTS

The means, standard deviations and correlations from Study 1¹ are provided in Table 2.

Manipulation checks

The scenarios' manipulations of perceived exploitation were successful, with participants reporting a non-exploitative work environment ($M = 1.41$, $SD = .73$), an environment with a medium level of perceived exploitation ($M = 5.53$, $SD = .99$) and an environment with a high level ($M = 6.29$, $SD = .55$) of perceived exploitation. The differences between non-exploitative and medium levels of perceived exploitation ($M_{diff} = 4.12$, $p < .001$), non-exploitative and high levels of exploitation ($M_{diff} = 4.87$, $p < .001$) and medium and high levels of perceived exploitation ($M_{diff} = .75$, $p < .001$) were all significant, thus suggesting that the study's developed scenarios successfully discriminated between levels of perceived exploitation. Reality checks showed that participants perceived the scenarios as being generally representative of real-world situations ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.19$), although the non-exploitative condition was perceived as being significantly less realistic than were the medium level ($M_{diff} = -.62$, $p = .01$) and the high level ($M_{diff} = -.58$, $p = .02$) scenarios.

Measurement model

We conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using the Lavaan package in R (version 06.19, Rosseel, 2012) to examine whether our tested model had better fit indices than the alternative nested models did. The measurement model contained four factors: perceived exploitation, inward-focused emotions, rumination and thwarted psychological needs. All but one of the results of the CFA for the hypothesized model showed acceptable model fit indices [χ^2 (371) = 975.56; CFI = .91; TLI = .91; SRMR = .04], with the exception being the RMSEA (.10), which is sensitive to small sample sizes and should not be used for assessing the fit of the model (Chen et al., 2008). The hypothesized model also offered better fit indices than less constrained nested models did, such as a two-factor model combining outcomes [χ^2 (376) = 1033.61; CFI = .91; TLI = .90; RMSEA = .11; SRMR = .04] and a single-factor model [χ^2 (377) = 1583.20; CFI = .83; TLI = .82; RMSEA = .14; SRMR = .07].

¹Given the relatively high correlations between rumination and thwarted psychological needs, we ran an additional analysis to minimize concerns about construct distinctiveness. The fit indices for the two-factor model were as follows χ^2 (63) = 198.303; CFI = .94; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .12; SRMR = .047, which were better than those for the one-factor model χ^2 (64) = 230.445; CFI = .92; TLI = .91; RMSEA = .13; SRMR = .054. The chi-squared difference was significant, and the CFI difference was 0.02, which showed that the two-factor model was a better option. We also note that the correlations did not exceed the commonly used cutoff (.85, Rönkkö & Cho, 2022).

Hypotheses testing

Before testing the hypotheses, we examined the differences between conditions, using analysis of variance (ANOVA) analyses and Bonferroni Post Hoc. We found significant differences between the means for the non-exploitative condition and those for the high-exploitation condition and also between the means for the non-exploitative and the medium-exploitation conditions, in all of the variables of the model: inward negative emotions (low-medium: $M_{\text{diff}} = 2.06, p < .001$; low-high: $M_{\text{diff}} = 1.96, p < .001$), rumination (low-medium: $M_{\text{diff}} = 1.84, p < .001$; low-high: $M_{\text{diff}} = 1.97, p < .001$), thwarted psychological needs (low-medium: $M_{\text{diff}} = 2.82, p < .001$; low-high: $M_{\text{diff}} = 3.27, p < .001$). However, there were no significant differences between the means for the medium- and high-exploitation conditions.

We then tested our hypotheses using path analysis with the Lavaan package in R (version 06.19, Rosseel, 2012). Our results showed that perceived organizational exploitation predicted inward-focused negative emotions ($B = 0.45, p < .001$), rumination ($B = 0.43, p < .001$) and thwarted psychological needs ($B = 0.68, p < .001$), thus supporting Hypotheses 1–3.

STUDY 1 DISCUSSION

The findings of Study 1 demonstrated that employees' perceptions of being subjected to organizational exploitation triggered inward-focused negative emotions and rumination and also thwarted individuals' basic psychological needs. An interesting finding was the lack of significant differences between medium and high levels of exploitation on the tested outcomes, which suggests that once employees perceive they are being exploited, even if not frequently, the resource depletion process is triggered.

Study 2 examines the effects of employees' perceptions of exploitation on their health (our full hypothesized model) in a real-world setting, using a multi-wave design. This addresses the experimental design's lack of ecological validity, thereby enhancing the robustness of our findings. In this study, we also propose that emotions, cognition and motivation are mechanisms through which perceptions of exploitation impact individuals' health (i.e. depressive symptoms [Hypothesis 4] and somatic complaints [Hypothesis 5]). In addition, we suggest that coworker support may dampen the effects of perceived exploitation on exploited employees' health outcomes (Hypotheses 6 and 7).

STUDY 2 METHODS

Procedures and participants

Study 2 was a multi-wave field study conducted in three waves separated by one-week intervals. In the first wave, we collected data about perceived organizational exploitation (independent variable); in the second wave, we requested data about coworker support, inwardly focused emotions, rumination and thwarted psychological needs (moderator and mediator variables); finally, in the third wave, we measured health-related constructs (dependent variables). The aim of the time lag between each wave was to reduce concerns regarding common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003) and to prevent participant attrition (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Data were collected through Prolific Ltd., and it exclusively targeted current employees in the UK Education and Training sector. A total of 400 responses were received at Time 1, 394 of which passed the attention checks (i.e. we asked participants to select 'strongly disagree' or 'strongly agree'). To ensure data quality, we only invited those who had passed the attention checks to participate at Time 2, and we received a total of 335 responses (85.03% response rate). Of those, $n = 4$ were eliminated for inattentiveness. At Time 3, 298 individuals responded to our survey, representing a 90.03% response rate. After we had eliminated the participants who failed their attention checks at Time 3, our final sample consisted of $N = 294$ participants who responded to all three waves.

Participants in this study were adult males ($n=147$, 50%), females ($n=145$, 49.3%) and identifying as another gender ($n=2$, 0.7%), whose average age was 45.65 years ($SD=11.25$) and who worked in the Education and Training sector in the United Kingdom. At the time of the study, participants were employed full-time (69%), part-time (24.5%), self-employed² (5.4%) or were in other employment situations (1%). We selected the Education and Training occupational sector based on survey data (Education Support, 2023; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023), which indicated that education staff often work long hours without adequate compensation and experience significant work-related stress, with some reporting symptoms of poor mental health as a result.³ The participants held various positions within their organizations, including teachers or lecturers (21.09%), faculty or curriculum heads (14.97%), specialized support staff (11.59%), administrative positions (8.84%), human resources and finance positions (7.48%), teachers' assistants (6.12%), IT support staff (5.44%), researchers (2.38%) and others (22.19%). Their mean job tenure was 8.67 years, and they worked an average of 34.16 h per week.

Measures

We used the same measures as those used in Study 1 for perceived exploitation (Time 1, $\alpha = .94$), rumination (Time 2, $\alpha = .80$), thwarted psychological needs (Time 2, $\alpha = .92$) and inward-focused emotions (Time 2, $\alpha = .77$). All responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, unless stated otherwise.

Coworker support (time 2)

Coworker support was measured with four items from Caplan et al.'s (1975) scale, on which participants rated how much coworker support they received. A sample item is 'How much can your coworkers be relied on when things get tough at work?' The Cronbach's alpha value was .84 and the response scale ranged from 'Not at all' to 'Almost Always'.

Depressive symptoms (time 3)

Depressive symptoms were measured using the four items from Bohannon et al.'s (2003) scale. Participants rated the extent to which they experienced different feelings related to depression over the previous week. An example item is 'You felt sad'. The Cronbach's alpha value was .82 and the response scale ranged from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'.

Somatic complaints (time 3)

Somatic complaints were measured using five items from Nomura et al.'s (2007) scale of somatic symptoms. Participants rated the extent to which they had experienced shoulder stiffness, headaches, fatigue, sleep disturbance and back pain. The Cronbach's alpha was .77, and the response scale ranged from 'Never' to 'Always'.

Control variables

We included gender and age as control variables. Prior research shows that women report higher overall somatic symptoms levels than men across populations and ages (Atasoy et al., 2022; Barsky et al., 2001).

²Self-employed participants were instructors, teachers, tutors, and consultants who worked for Education and Training sector organizations.

³These characteristics suggest that at least some individuals perceive themselves as being exploited, thus ensuring a certain level of incident.

In addition, younger individuals are more likely to report somatic symptoms as well (Hilderink et al., 2013). These patterns were found in our data and, following Becker's (2005) recommendations, we controlled for gender and age.

STUDY 2 RESULTS

Table 3 presents Study 2's descriptive statistics and correlations between the study and control variables.

Given the nature of our data and the model's complexity, we tested our hypotheses via structural equation modelling (SEM) using the *modsem* package for R, which is an extended version of the *Lavaan* package (Slupphaug et al., 2024). We used the parcelling strategy for factors with more than five items, which helps to reduce the complexity and provides efficient, reliable and valid indicators of the latent variables (Little et al., 2013). More specifically, parcelling reduces the sample-size-to-parameter ratio (Bentler & Chou, 1987), providing more stable estimations. Moreover, in cases of model complexity, aggregating items into parcels increases true-score variance and reduces item-specific and random errors, making parcels more reliable indicators than individual items (Little et al., 2013). We also followed Lin et al.'s (2010) recommendation and used the double-mean-centering approach because it yields more accurate estimates when the data are not distributed normally, and it removes potential collinearities, outperforming both mean-centering and orthogonalizing strategies (Lin et al., 2010; Slupphaug et al., 2024). We computed robust standard errors and confidence intervals to provide consistent and reliable estimates without requiring normality assumptions. We first ran a multiple mediation model and then the full model. We controlled for the effects of gender and age. Both models presented an acceptable fit (mediation model: CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .10; moderated mediation model = CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .08).

Results from the mediation analyses revealed that perceived exploitation was positively related to inward-focused negative emotions ($B = .15, p < .05$), rumination ($B = .18, p < .05$) and thwarted psychological needs ($B = .42, p < .001$), thus supporting Hypotheses 1–3. Hypothesis 4 suggested that perceived exploitation would be negatively related to depressive symptoms through all mediators. Table 4 shows that inward-focused emotions and thwarted psychological needs significantly mediated the relationship between perceived exploitation and depressive symptoms (indirect effects: $B = .08, 95\% \text{ CI } [.026, .150]$, $B = .16, 95\% \text{ CI } [.056, .254]$ respectively), thus supporting Hypothesis 4a,c. However, Hypothesis 4b was not supported, because rumination did not significantly mediate the relationship between perceived exploitation and depressive symptoms (indirect effect: $B = .04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.003, .079]$). The direct effect of perceived exploitation was non-significant ($B = .20, p = .06$), which meant that the relationship was fully mediated by inward-focused emotions and thwarted psychological needs.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that perceived exploitation would have a positive effect on somatic complaints through all three mediators, and the results showed significant full mediation effects on somatic complaints through both rumination ($B = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [.003, .087]$) and thwarted psychological needs ($B = .10, 95\% \text{ CI } [.028, .181]$), with a non-significant direct effect of perceived exploitation on somatic complaints ($B = .12, p > .05$), thus capturing a full mediation in that situation. Inward-focused negative emotions were not a significant mediator ($B = .03, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.002, .068]$).

Overall, we found that the pathways to the outcomes differed. Emotional and motivational paths were significant in explaining the relationship between perceived exploitation and depressive symptoms, whereas cognitive and motivational paths were significant in the case of perceived exploitation and somatic complaints.

Hypotheses 6 and 7 suggested that the conditional indirect effects of perceived exploitation on depressive symptoms and somatic complaints via inward-focused negative emotions (Hypotheses 6a and 7a), rumination (Hypotheses 6b and 7b) and thwarted psychological needs (Hypotheses 6c and 7c) would be weaker when coworker support was high than when it was low. We first examined the simple interaction effects that demonstrated the moderating effect of coworker support between perceived exploitation and thwarted psychological needs ($B = .11, p < .05$). Table 5 presents the results of the conditional indirect effects with a 95% CI, and Figure 2 displays the pattern of the interaction. Despite the significant interaction and

TABLE 3 Study 2: descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between variables.

Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Perceived exploitation	2.37 (1.15)	-							
2. Rumination	4.28 (1.14)	.15**	-						
3. TPN	3.17 (1.27)	.49**	.42**	-					
4. Inward-focused NE	2.30 (1.14)	.21**	.34**	.51**	-				
5. Coworker support	4.83 (1.09)	-.32**	-.06	-.42**	-.23**	-			
6. Somatic complaints	3.25 (1.27)	.27**	.34**	.40**	.33**	-.14*	-		
7. Depressive symptoms	3.19 (1.49)	.40**	.37**	.51**	.46**	-.25**	.61**	-	
8. Gender	—	-.04	-.002	.07	.22*	-.01	.16**	.07	-
9. Age	45.65 (11.25)	-.05	-.20**	-.27**	-.22**	-.04	-.14*	-.13*	-.04

Note: Gender: man = 0; woman = 1. Given the non-normality distribution of data, the table displays Spearman's rho correlations.

Abbreviations: NE, negative emotions; TPN, thwarted psychological needs.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 4 Indirect effects of perceived exploitation on health outcomes.

Independent Variable	Mediator	Outcome	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i> [95% CI]
Perceived Exploitation →	Inward-focused Emotions →	Depressive Symptoms	.08	.03	.015 [.026, .150]
Perceived Exploitation →	Rumination →	Depressive Symptoms	.04	.02	.067 [−.003, .079]
Perceived Exploitation →	Thwarted Needs →	Depressive Symptoms	.16	.05	.002 [.056, .254]
Perceived Exploitation →	Inward-focused Emotions →	Somatic Complaints	.03	.02	.064 [−.002, .068]
Perceived Exploitation →	Rumination →	Somatic Complaints	.05	.02	.034 [.003, .087]
Perceived Exploitation →	Thwarted Needs →	Somatic Complaints	.10	.04	.007 [.028, .181]

TABLE 5 Conditional indirect effects of perceived exploitation on health outcomes.

Path	Moderator level	Estimate	SE	95% CI	<i>p</i> -value
PE → Inward-focused Emotions → Depressive Symptoms	Low coworker support	−.00	.04	[−.076, .072]	.964
	High coworker support	.08	.05	[−.008, .172]	.075
PE → Rumination → Depressive Symptoms	Low coworker support	.03	.02	[−.012, .070]	.166
	High coworker support	.04	.03	[−.009, .098]	.106
PE → Thwarted Psychological Needs → Depressive Symptoms	Low coworker support	.08	.03	[.009, .142]	.027
	High coworker support	.17	.06	[.062, .285]	.002
PE → Inward-focused Emotions → Somatic Complaints	Low coworker support	−.00	.20	[−.030, .029]	.964
	High coworker support	.03	.02	[−.009, .073]	.125
PE → Rumination → Somatic Complaints	Low coworker support	.03	.02	[−.010, .077]	.127
	High coworker support	.05	.03	[−.007, .112]	.086
PE → Thwarted Psychological Needs → Somatic Complaints	Low coworker support	.05	.02	[.004, .099]	.033
	High coworker support	.12	.05	[.028, .210]	.010

conditional indirect effect of perceived exploitation and coworker support on thwarted psychological needs, the effect was contrary to our prediction. Rather than buffering the positive relationship between perceived exploitation and thwarted psychological needs, coworker support seemed to intensify it. Specifically, the results showed that the positive effect of perceived exploitation on depressive symptoms via thwarted psychological needs became stronger when coworker support was high (low: $B = .08, p < .05$ and high: $B = .17, p < .05$). The same pattern was found for somatic complaints (low: $B = .05, p < .05$ and high: $B = .12, p < .05$).

STUDY 2 DISCUSSION

Study 2 replicated and extended the findings of Study 1. Consistent with the findings of Study 1, the direct relationships between perceived exploitation and negative emotions, rumination and thwarted psychological needs were confirmed. Study 2 demonstrated that employees' perceived exploitation activates their motivational path and indirectly increases both their depressive symptoms and their somatic complaints. The emotional path was only relevant for depressive symptoms, whereas the cognitive path

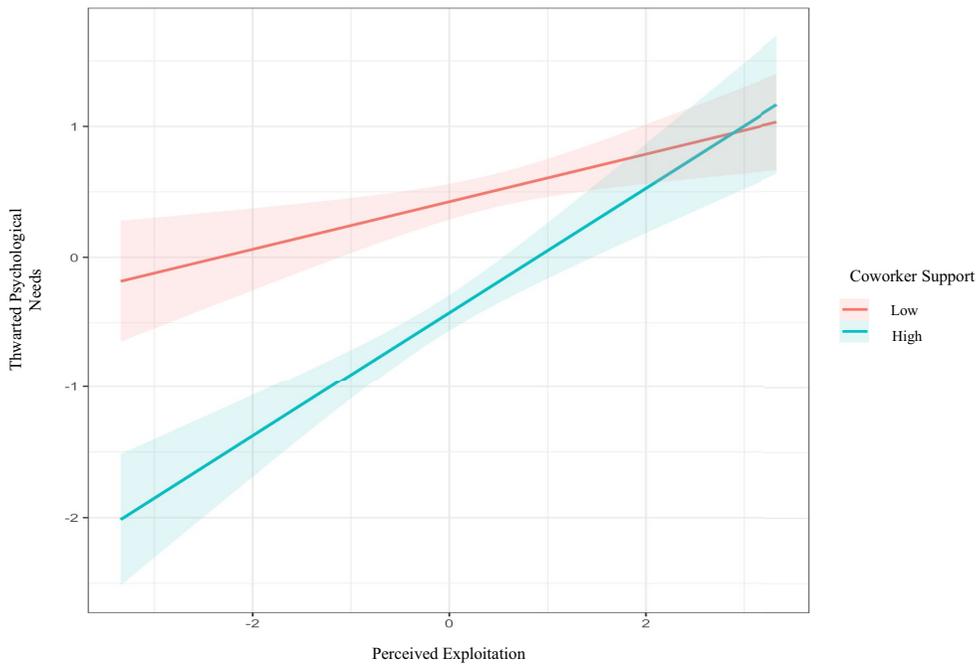


FIGURE 2 Interaction effect of perceived exploitation \times coworker support on thwarted psychological needs.

was only relevant for somatic complaints. We also found that coworker support does not appear to buffer the negative effects of perceived exploitation but instead amplifies its effects.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our two studies expand the theoretical basis of the effects of employees' perception of organizational exploitation (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019) by exploring potential explanations that account for its deleterious effect on workers' health-related outcomes. Across the two studies, our findings showed that employees' perceptions of employer exploitation trigger different processes, which in turn have a differential effect on their health-related outcomes. Of our potential explanations, thwarted psychological needs are the most consistent in explaining the effects of perceived organizational exploitation on employees' health-related outcomes. Conversely, emotional and cognitive mechanisms are important to explaining workers' depressive symptoms and somatic complaints, respectively. Finally, contrary to our predictions, coworker support (a relational resource) seems to intensify the impact of perceived exploitation on thwarted psychological needs, with further effects on both types of workers' health outcomes. These findings have important implications for theory and research on employees' perceived organizational exploitation and employment relationships.

Theoretical contributions

Our findings advance the knowledge on exploitation in work settings in a number of ways. First, we extend the concept of exploitation by examining a more subjective and subtle form of exploitation and its effects on employees' health. Our findings not only reinforce the theoretical relevance of organizational exploitation from an individual's perspective (i.e. their perception), complementing sociological and industrial relations approaches, but they also suggest that the

impact of perceived exploitation goes beyond negative emotions, attitudes and behavioural outcomes (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019) and affects an individual's physical and psychological health. The conceptualization of perceived exploitation as employees' subjective appraisal that the organization uses their invested resources (e.g. time, energy, effort and skills) without adequate compensation or reciprocal benefit illustrates how perceived organizational exploitation occurs. When employees' resources are threatened or unavailable—despite significant personal investment—employees are likely to experience resource depletion, and this entails resource losses at emotional, cognitive and motivational levels.

Second, using insights from COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), we advance the conceptual foundation for understanding *why* employee perceptions of exploitation lead to both psychological and physical health problems. We move beyond emotions (Livne-Ofer et al., 2019) as the exclusive explanation for the deleterious consequences of perceived exploitation, and in particular, identify health-related outcomes such as depressive symptoms and somatic complaints. Our findings demonstrate that emotions, cognition and motivation are three separate intervening processes that shed light on why the feeling of being exploited has deleterious health consequences. Specifically, our examination of how perceived exploitation simultaneously triggers different processes reveals the inherent resource losses characteristic of exploitative relationships and triggers a spiral of additional resource depletion—the loss of emotional, cognitive and motivational resources. This argument is rooted in the 'resource caravan passageways' principle (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Accordingly, individuals' resources exist within ecological conditions that either promote and build or undermine and obstruct the generation and boosting of those resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In environments of perceived exploitation, organizations undermine and erode their employees' resource reservoirs, and that erosion subsequently impairs employees' health.

The differential pathways found underscore the need to include different mechanisms to more fully account for the effects of employees' perceived organizational exploitation on their health. Thwarting of psychological needs appears to be the mechanism with greater explanatory power than the other mechanisms, suggesting that perceived exploitation directly targets and harms basic psychological needs and, therefore, employees' motivation. Specifically, our findings suggest that perceived exploitation has a generalized harmful effect on employees' need to experience mastery within their desired areas of expertise (i.e. competence), their need to own their behaviour and exercise self-direction (i.e. autonomy), and their need to feel connected to the organization and its members (i.e. relatedness). Perceptions of organizational exploitation convey to employees that their efforts and behaviours are not acknowledged by the organization, are instrumentally used and controlled by the organization, and are not supported, all of which threatens their autonomy and relatedness and their need for recognized competence. Because these resources play roles in maintaining individuals' well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000), their loss further elicits psychological and physical impairment.

The activation of individuals' emotional and motivational processes highlights how perceived exploitation triggers an immediate emotional response and frustrates their psychological needs, which is then translated into poorer psychological health. Specifically, this pathway captures how employees' perceived exploitation deprives them of their needs and generates negative emotions that intensify their resource loss, ultimately leading to depressive symptoms. According to COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), perceived exploitation acts as a stressor, undermining the fulfilment of needs and the regulation of emotions. Specifically, negative emotions consume additional resources and may fuel a spiral of resource loss. Furthermore, guilt and shame lead individuals to focus on themselves, preventing them from acquiring new resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Thwarted psychological needs and rumination explain why perceived exploitation impairs physical health. Thwarted needs reflect threats or stressors and are likely to activate the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis and the sympathetic nervous system, which control the body's levels of cortisol. In parallel, rumination on the exploitative situation does not allow the body's systems to regulate and achieve their 'normal state' (Brosschot et al., 2006). In such situations, this psychophysiological arousal is likely to be manifested via somatic complaints (Ottaviani et al., 2013).

Our final contribution supports Jolly et al.'s (2021) argument that coworker support can either reduce or intensify the dynamic between a stressor and its outcome, contingent upon the context. Our findings point to the downside of coworker support, which challenges COR's argument that support is a relational resource. A potential explanation for the amplifying effects of coworker support is that sharing and discussing perceptions of organizational exploitation with other coworkers who are also likely to feel exploited may add 'salt to the wounds'. In an exploitative work setting, coworker support is likely to validate the employees' perceptions of exploitation, which then reinforces the idea that the employee-organization relationship is significantly more advantageous to the organization than to the employee. This may be especially true in situations in which employees lack the power or agency to change their circumstances, thus promoting a shared sense of helplessness, due in part to a power imbalance with the organization. Furthermore, in such conditions, coworker support may not be sufficient to assuage individuals or even be beneficial at all (Rook & Dooley, 1985). For instance, coworkers may say 'you/we will get through it' or 'it is only until you/we find a better job', with the intention to help, yet such comments may not comfort the individual at the time if the situation is seen as unchangeable. At that point, exploited individuals may be feeling acutely aware that the organization is taking advantage of them and failing to satisfy their psychological needs.

Interestingly, we found that coworker support reinforces the thwarting of psychological needs that are triggered by perceived exploitation, but it had no effect on rumination or inward-focused emotions. This finding suggests that this relational resource has the potential to impact the (dis)satisfaction of basic psychological needs because it is highly dependent on environmental input (Ryan & Deci, 2000), yet it may not be impactful enough to reduce negative intra-individual processes stemming from perceived exploitation. In this case, as COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) posits, resource loss appears to be more salient than resource gain is, and having a relational resource may not always offset the loss spiral created by perceived exploitation. In the absence of additional resources, therefore, support from coworkers may be insufficient or even detrimental to employee well-being. Finally, another alternative explanation for coworker support's adverse impact may be related to the difference between receiving support (availability) and the quality of that support.

Limitations

Our research was not without limitations. The first limitation had to do with two aspects of the study's design: the self-reported measures, which may have led to potential common method bias, and the one-week separations between measurements, which may have been too short to fully capture all of the effects of perceived exploitation. However, to alleviate concerns about common method bias, we randomized the order of the questions in the surveys to avoid common method bias produced by item context, and we used a multi-wave design in Study 2 to separate independent and dependent variables in an effort to minimize problems with self-reported measures. The one-week lag was chosen to mitigate attrition rates. However, given the temporal interval between surveys, we cannot be certain that our design did not impact our results, particularly because significant events may unfold in the days between measurement points. Given the stability of the perception of the quality of the employee-organization relationship (e.g. Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010; Wayne et al., 1997) and also the fact that employment has been found to affect employees' health over different time frames (Pulford et al., 2022), we are confident in our results.

A second limitation had to do with the inherent limitations of experimental studies (i.e. their potential lack of ecological validity and their inability to show effects over time) and the shortcomings of field studies, which together do not allow for the establishment of clear temporal precedence, thus limiting our ability to draw causal inferences.

A third limitation derives from the fact that all of our data were collected through Prolific. Although the source may raise concerns about data quality or potential confounding biases, previous literature has indicated that data collected specifically through the Prolific platform is not of lower quality than data obtained from other sources. In fact, participants on Prolific tend to be more honest and attentive

than those from other platforms (Douglas et al., 2023; Peer et al., 2021). Prior studies have also shown that online platforms can yield data quality that is comparable to or better than that obtained from convenience or student samples (Peer et al., 2021). Moreover, in regard to confounding biases, we selected one specific sector (i.e. education) in order to control for other variables such as labour norms, power dynamics or working conditions that could impact employee perceptions of exploitation and their effects. Given that the data may reflect specific conditions of this sector, therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, recognizing that their generalizability to other sectors may be limited.

A final limitation concerns the use of single-item measures to assess emotions. While these measures are widely used and can be highly efficient (Fisher et al., 2016), they may not fully capture the multidimensional nature of emotional experiences.

Future research

Our study identifies several directions for future research. First, to further test the robustness of our findings, researchers may want to expand the outcomes and collect them from different sources (such as spouses). Multi-source data may also be useful to detect spillover effects from exploitative working relationships onto the home environment. Moreover, examining the model using a different design, namely a longitudinal design, may help researchers to confirm the direction of the proposed relationships. Future studies could gather data on predictors, mediators and outcomes at multiple times, in an effort to advance the understanding of potential changes over time and to untangle the dynamic relationships between perceived organizational exploitation, explanatory processes and workers' health-related outcomes.

Although we found that coworker support had an amplifying negative effect, future studies could examine the conditions under which coworker support can ameliorate the negative effects of perceived exploitation. Specifically, future research could examine the nature of coworker support to assess whether this may dampen or intensify the effects of perceived exploitation. For instance, instrumental task-related support may mitigate the effect of perceived exploitation, while emotional support may do little to assuage the exploitative situation for the employee.

Another fruitful line of research would be to expand the outcomes, beyond health, to include behaviours, such as deviant behaviours (when would employees who feel exploited engage in negative reciprocation?) and upward undermining (are exploited employees likely to react negatively toward their supervisors because they are representative of the organization?) (Eisenberger et al., 2020). Such bottom-up action may be difficult in these exploitative contexts, and it may expose the employee to acts of retaliation. Theoretically, bottom-up reactions may be explained by the defensive mode mechanism, in which employees use deviant behaviour as a strategic move to regain resources such as control or self-esteem (COR theory, Hobfoll et al., 2018). An alternative theoretical lens is attribution theory (Aquino et al., 2001), which elucidates how and when employees are likely to invest their remaining resources to avenge. Specifically, when employees perceive organizational exploitation as intentional and controllable, the likelihood that they will attempt to retaliate against the organization will increase. Moreover, the attribution process also helps employees decide whether, when and how much the cost of retaliation would be under their current condition. Empirically, previous research has found that perceived exploitation increased perceptions of injustice, which in turn led to deviant behaviours in frontline service workers (Huang et al., 2023). Exploited employees also perceive that the exploiting organization uses unfair procedures and withholds fair rewards, thus justifying retaliation.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine these organizational relationships in different contexts, such as healthcare. The healthcare industry faces several psychosocial risks, such as 'high workload, third-party violence and harassment, irregular working hours, and high emotional job demands' (EU-OSHA, 2023, p.1). Because patient needs are often urgent, employees may feel that they must sacrifice their own resources and well-being. These kinds of behaviours may be taken for granted by organizations, and are likely to fuel employees' perceptions of exploitation.

Practical implications

In conjunction with the work of Livne-Ofer et al. (2019), we demonstrate that workers' perceptions of exploitation are prevalent in a variety of jobs. Therefore, an important organizational action would be to take steps to understand why employees perceive their employment relationship as exploitative. Indeed, it is important to note that we are discussing perceptions of exploitation and not objective indicators, meaning that managers may be unaware that employees consider their work relationship as exploitative. Consequently, it is important for organizations to communicate with employees to assess their views about the workplace environment to prevent the development of exploitative perceptions in the first place. Voice and feedback channels should be promoted as safe mechanisms for employees to express their concerns. However, employees will only voice their concerns if they think they will be heard (Folger et al., 1979). Such an assurance may be a very difficult challenge for managers and organizations if the perceived exploitation is stable and recurrent.

Our study demonstrates that employees' perceived exploitation leads to thwarted psychological needs, as well as rumination and negative emotions. Organizations should promote initiatives that satisfy their employees' need for autonomy (e.g. more freedom in doing their jobs), competence (e.g. development and training activities) and relatedness (i.e. strong social ties between coworkers and supervisors). Indeed, at the most basic level, the promotion of initiatives that reduce employees' perceptions of exploitation is crucial for organizations because poor employee health can affect organizational outcomes. Specifically, employees' depressive symptoms and somatic complaints stemming from perceptions of being exploited can contribute to negative employee attitudes toward the organization, such as organizational disengagement and turnover intentions (Bakker et al., 2004; Bhat et al., 2024) and, ultimately, can lead to higher rates of absenteeism and sick leave (Kelloway et al., 2023). Employee absences from work due to health-related reasons are on the rise and pose serious challenges not only to organizational performance but also to healthcare providers and state-funded welfare systems (Kelloway et al., 2023).

The fact that coworker support was not enough to counteract the effects of perceived exploitation and can even exacerbate the negative impact of perceived exploitation is a particularly meaningful insight for organizations, suggesting that relational and horizontal resources (peer-to-peer relationships) may not prevent the resource loss spiral, and interventions by managers may be needed. Organizations should be able to reduce employees' perceptions of exploitation and its detrimental effects by auditing workplace policies and clarifying the policies' transparency and fairness. Transparency in organizational communication and decision-making can help mitigate the perceptions of exploitation by helping employees make sense of what happens in the workplace, including in terms of the organization's intentions and constraints.

CONCLUSION

Exploitative working relationships may be more prevalent than one might think. Yet, we do not know enough about this phenomenon. This study expands the theory of the effects of perceived exploitation, but more empirical work is warranted. We call for future research in the fields of management and organizational behaviour to investigate the development and consequences of perceived exploitative employment relationships.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sandra Costa: Conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; methodology; validation; visualization; writing – review and editing; software; formal analysis; project administration; data curation; supervision; resources. **Jacqueline Coyle-Shapiro:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization; validation; supervision; investigation; methodology. **Sara Corlett:** Writing – original draft; methodology; software; formal analysis; writing – review and editing; investigation. **Tiago Aguiar:** Methodology; formal analysis; investigation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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