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**Explaining the Negative Consequences of Organizational Dehumanization:
The Mediating Role of Psychological Need Thwarting**

Constantin Lagios, Gaëtane Caesens, Nathan Nguyen, and Florence Stinglhamber

Psychological Sciences Research Institute, Université catholique de Louvain,

Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Author Note

Constantin Lagios  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4956-0036>

Gaëtane Caesens  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6505-4523>

Nathan Nguyen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6969-3894>

Florence Stinglhamber  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4013-1625>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Constantin Lagios, Psychological Sciences Research Institute, Place Cardinal Mercier, 10, L3.05.01, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. E-mail: constantin.lagios@uclouvain.be. Phone: + 32 10 47 46

Abstract

Organizational dehumanization (OD), defined as employees' perceptions of being treated as mere tools by their organization, was shown to negatively affect employees and organizations. To explain such detrimental effects, scholars argued that OD might thwart employees' fundamental psychological needs. Yet, evidence of this mechanism remains empirically inexistent. Filling this gap, this research aims at investigating the mediating role of psychological need thwarting in the relationships between OD and employees' well-being and attitudes. Based on a cross-sectional ($N = 340$) and a two-wave study (three months apart; $N = 603$), the results indicated that OD thwarts employees' psychological needs which are, in turn, negatively related to their well-being (psychological strains, absenteeism, and job satisfaction) and attitudes (turnover intentions and affective commitment).

Keywords: organizational dehumanization, psychological need thwarting, self-determination theory, absenteeism, job satisfaction

Explaining the Negative Consequences of Organizational Dehumanization:**The Mediating Role of Psychological Need Thwarting**

In exploring the dark side of the employee-employer relationship, scholars have recently begun to devote their attention to the concept of organizational dehumanization (OD), defined as “the experience of an employee who feels objectified by his/her organization, denied personal subjectivity, and made to feel like a tool or instrument for the organization’s ends” (Bell & Khoury, 2011, p. 168). While there exists converging evidence that OD is detrimental for both employees and organizations (e.g., Bell & Khoury, 2016; Caesens et al., 2017), the processes underpinning these deleterious consequences are currently unclear. Interestingly, several authors (e.g., Caesens et al., 2019; Christoff, 2014) suggested that dehumanizing organizational treatments would frustrate employees’ basic psychological needs, hence explaining the negative consequences of OD. In line with this and responding to the call of Stinglhamber et al. (2021) who urged for an empirical investigation of the mechanisms underlying the harmful effects of OD, this research aims at empirically testing the mediating role of psychological need thwarting in the relationships between OD and employees’ well-being and attitudes. By doing so, this research thus contributes to the theoretical development of OD, as no study has so far empirically examined its underlying mechanisms.

Organizational Dehumanization

Emanating from the social psychology literature, the term “dehumanization” refers to the denial of human characteristics (Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). Recently, scholars proposed that dehumanization may also occur in organizational contexts, so that employees feel treated by their organization as mere tools or resources dedicated to the pursuit of organizational goals (Bell & Khoury, 2011). Such a perception is not without consequences as empirical work showed that OD has adverse effects on both employees’ well-being (e.g.,

negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to psychological strains) and attitudes (e.g., negatively related to affective commitment and positively related to turnover intentions; Bell & Khoury, 2016; Caesens et al., 2017, 2019; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020; Stinglhamber et al., 2021).

The Mediating Role of Psychological Need Thwarting

To explain these harmful effects, scholars (e.g., Christoff, 2014) suggested that OD would frustrate employees' basic psychological needs, namely their need for autonomy (i.e., being volitional and responsible for one's behavior), competence (i.e., being efficient and capable in one's environment) and relatedness (i.e., being connected and accepted by others; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Surprisingly, no empirical research has so far investigated this proposition. Relying on self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), we argue that OD is a negative experience that actively thwarts employees' fundamental needs. As dehumanizing organizations instrumentalize and deliberately deny one's decision latitude (Bell & Khoury, 2011), employees facing OD are likely to perceive their need for autonomy as frustrated. Furthermore, OD may thwart the need for competence, as the organization conveys that employees are easily replaceable tools. Finally, Väyrynen and Laari-Salmela (2018) noted that employees experiencing OD are not able to maintain a sense of affiliation and connection to their organization, which might thus frustrate their need for relatedness. Although these three needs are conceptually distinct, they are interdependent and intercorrelated, meaning that the frustration of one need facilitates the frustration of the other two (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Consequently, most studies operationalized need thwarting as an overall construct (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2011; Gillet et al., 2015; Huyghebaert et al., 2018).

A central tenet of SDT is that need thwarting has major implications for individuals' well-being and attitudes. Individuals whose needs are thwarted would indeed use a number of

maladaptive coping strategies that, over time, produce more ill-being and negative attitudes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Supporting this, research showed that need thwarting is negatively related to job satisfaction and affective commitment, and positively related to stress, burnout, and turnover intentions (Gillet et al., 2012, 2015; Huyghebaert et al., 2018; Rouse et al., 2020).

Based on the above, and as depicted in Figure 1, we posited the following:

Hypothesis 1: Psychological need thwarting mediates the relationships between OD and (a) affective commitment, (b) job satisfaction, (c) turnover intentions, (d) psychological strains, and (e) absenteeism.

Studies' Overview

Two studies were conducted to test the above-mentioned hypotheses. Study 1 uses a cross-sectional design and tests all hypotheses (H1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, and 1e). Study 2 is a two-wave study with a time lag of three months, consistent with prior research (e.g., Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2020). Due to space limitations in the surveys, only three outcomes were considered: affective commitment (H1a), job satisfaction (H1b), and turnover intentions (H1c). OD was assessed at T1, psychological need thwarting and outcomes at T2.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited via the Prolific platform, which invites them to complete an online questionnaire in exchange for monetary compensation. Specifically, the survey of Study 1 took 8 minutes to complete and respondents received £1.10 for their participation, whereas the surveys of Study 2 took 9 minutes to complete and respondents received £1.21 at each time point. This compensation is consistent with Gleibs's (2017) ethical recommendations, thereby guarantying participants a fair and decent pay. Participants were also assured that their responses would be anonymous and kept confidential. To participate,

respondents had to be native English speakers, have an approval rate of at least 90% in previous surveys completed on Prolific, not be self-employed, and work full-time or part-time. Furthermore, individuals who participated in Study 1 were not eligible to participate in Study 2. After excluding participants who did not correctly answer to at least one attentional check question (e.g., For this statement, please tick “strongly agree”) and who changed organization between T1 and T2 (Study 2), the final samples consisted of 340 participants for Study 1 and 603 participants for Study 2 (response rate at T2 = 74.82%). Table 1 displays participants’ demographics.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all items were assessed using 7-point Likert agreement scales.

OD was assessed using the 11-item scale of Caesens et al. (2017; e.g., “My organization treats me as if I were an object”).

Psychological need thwarting was measured using the nine items from Gillet et al. (2012; e.g., “In my work, I feel pushed to behave in certain ways”).

Affective commitment was measured using the six items from Meyer et al. (1993; e.g., “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me”). In Study 2, only the three highest loading items were used.

Job satisfaction was assessed using the four items from Eisenberger et al. (1997; e.g., “All in all, I’m very satisfied with my current job”).

Turnover intentions were measured using the 3-item scale of Jaros (1997; e.g., “I often think about quitting this organization”).

Psychological strains were assessed using four items from Van Katwyk et al. (2000; e.g., “During the past 30 days, I felt tense at work”). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *never* to *always*.

Absenteeism was measured with the two items of Johns (2011; e.g., “How many days were you absent from work during the past 12 months?”).

Control variables. Following Becker’s (2005) recommendations, we tested our models with and without the demographic variables that were related to the dependent variables (Table 2). As the inclusion of these controls did not change the interpretations of the findings, the results reported below are free from any controls for parsimonious reasons.

Results

Measurement Models

Confirmatory factor analyses were performed via Mplus 8.5 (MLR [robust maximum likelihood] estimator) to assess the distinctiveness of the latent variables included in both studies. As scholars suggested that “the three psychological needs tend to function in unison in natural settings” (Bartholomew et al., 2011, p. 95), and consistent with previous studies (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2011; Gillet, 2015; Huyghebaert et al., 2018), we created a second-order latent factor (i.e., psychological need thwarting) represented by three first-order latent factors (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness need thwarting)¹. The results indicated that the seven- (Study 1) and the five-factor (Study 2) models fitted the data well and were superior to all more constrained models based on the Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference test (Satorra & Bentler, 2001; see Tables 3 and 4). Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations for both studies are displayed in Table 2.

Structural Models

The hypothesized model of Study 1 fitted the data well. Nevertheless, an alternative model adding direct paths between OD and affective commitment and turnover intentions was superior to the hypothesized model ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 38.53$, SBc [Satorra-Bentler scaled chi square] = 29.87, $p < .001$) and was retained as the final model ($\chi^2(681) = 1525.28$; RMSEA [root mean

¹ Results of analyses performed with the three psychological needs separately are reported in online supplements.

square error of approximation] = .06; SRMR [standardized root mean square residual] = .07; CFI [comparative fit index] = .91). As shown in Figure 2, OD was positively related to psychological need thwarting which was, in turn, negatively associated with affective commitment and job satisfaction, and positively associated with turnover intentions, psychological strains, and absenteeism. Moreover, OD had a negative direct effect on affective commitment and a positive direct effect on turnover intentions¹. Bootstrap analyses indicated that all five indirect effects were significant (Table 5), supporting all hypotheses.

The hypothesized model of Study 2 presented a good fit with the data. However, an alternative model adding a direct path between OD and affective commitment was superior to the hypothesized model ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 33.76$, $SBc = 49.45$, $p < .001$) and was considered as the final model ($\chi^2(394) = 1110.96$; $RMSEA = .06$; $SRMR = .06$; $CFI = .94$). As displayed in Figure 2, OD was positively related to psychological need thwarting which was, in turn, negatively related to affective commitment and job satisfaction, and positively related to turnover intentions. OD also had a negative direct effect on affective commitment¹. Bootstrap analyses showed that all three indirect effects were significant (Table 5), supporting H1a, 1b, and 1c.

Discussion

To explain why the experience of being treated as a tool by one's organization (i.e., OD) was deleterious for both employees and organizations, scholars assumed that OD would frustrate employees' psychological needs. However, empirical evidence of this mechanism is lacking. Relying on SDT which explicitly recognizes that the frustration of psychological needs is deleterious for one's well-being and attitudes, this research aimed at empirically examining whether the adverse consequences of OD can be explained by employees' psychological need thwarting. Using a cross-sectional and a two-wave study, our findings showed that need thwarting mediates the relationships between OD and employees' well-

being and attitudes. First, these empirical findings are consistent with the assumption that employees perceiving OD are likely to consider that their fundamental needs have been thwarted (e.g., Christoff, 2014). Second, our results indicated that the frustration of employees' basic needs is detrimental for their well-being and attitudes (e.g., Rouse et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the analyses performed with the three psychological needs separately (see online supplements) indicated that the need for competence is the most salient need for explaining the deleterious consequences of OD. Indeed, out of the three psychological needs thwarted by OD, the need for competence was the only one associated with all the outcomes considered in this research. This finding is consistent with prior studies where the need for competence emerged as the most influential need with regards to employees' well-being and attitudes (e.g., Bartholomew et al. 2014; Gillet et al., 2019), and may be explained by the fact that competence plays a particularly central role in work settings (Spreitzer, 1995).

Overall, this research goes beyond existing work on OD and provides first empirical evidence that OD is an adverse experience that is positively related to employees' psychological needs thwarting, thereby negatively affecting their well-being and attitudes. Moreover, just like interpersonal mistreatments at work (e.g., abusive supervision; Lian et al., 2012), this research suggests that mistreatments emanating from a more abstract and distal source such as the organization have the potential to thwart employees' fundamental needs.

As need thwarting also impairs employees' ability to regulate their behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000), future research should examine the behavioral consequences of OD through psychological need thwarting. Moreover, as suggested by the remaining significant direct paths, other processes may explain the adverse effects of OD. For instance, consistent with the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), an interesting future avenue would be to examine

whether employees experiencing OD engage in negative attitudes and behaviors to reciprocate the mistreatment they received from their organization.

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations. First, it does not allow to draw causal conclusions, and reverse causality cannot be ruled out (Ployhart & MacKenzie, 2015). Future research using experimental or longitudinal designs is needed to determine causal relationships. Second, common method variance may have artificially inflated the correlations between the constructs. However, several methodological (e.g., use of validated scales) and statistical (e.g., Harman's test) precautions were taken and lessen concerns regarding this bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

From a practical standpoint, this research suggests that organizations should strive to raise awareness of OD and psychological need thwarting by highlighting their negative consequences and, more importantly, the work practices that might reduce them. Implementing fair procedures (Bell & Khoury, 2016) and/or human resources policies that increase perceptions of organizational support (e.g., training programs; Caesens et al., 2017) has been shown to significantly decrease employees' perception of OD. Moreover, conferring more decision latitude, setting optimal challenges, and promoting interactions among employees are appropriate strategies to avoid psychological need thwarting at work (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

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Table 1*Participants' Demographic Characteristics*

		Study 1 (<i>N</i> = 340)			Study 2 (<i>N</i> = 603)		
Variable		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%
Age		37.56	10.99	-	36.12	9.87	-
Organizational tenure		7.82	6.74	-	6.39	6.22	-
Gender	Male			62.1			57.71
	Female			37.4			42.39
	Other			0.6			-
Education	High school			11.47			12.60
	Some college			25.29			22.06
	Bachelor's degree			41.18			42.62
	Master's degree			17.35			16.92
	Ph.D.			2.94			2.65
	Other			1.76			3.15
Organizational size	1-9 employees			5.88			6.63
	10-49 employees			15.29			18.41
	50-249 employees			20.88			19.57
	250-499 employees			9.41			8.29
	500-999 employees			8.53			6.63
	1000-4999 employees			18.24			17.41
	5000-9999 employees			4.71			8.29
	More than 10000 employees			17.06			14.76
Sector	Health and social care			13.24			12.11
	Teaching and education			12.35			12.11
	Retail and sales			12.35			11.44
Contract type	Full-time			73.8			81.1
	Part-time			26.2			18.9

Note. Only the three most frequent sectors are displayed.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations among Variables*

	M_{S1}	SD_{S1}	M_{S2}	SD_{S2}	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Gender	-	-	-	-	-	.03	.02	-.02	.24***	-.02	-.02	.02	.12**	.02	.02	-	-
2. Age	37.57	10.99	36.20	9.90	.01	-	-.08*	.06	.10**	.53***	-.03	-.10*	.08*	-.17***	.09*	-	-
3. Education	-	-	3.74	.98	-.01	-.13**	-	.09*	-.06	-.12**	-.10*	-.03	.08	.03	.11*	-	-
4. Organizational size	-	-	4.81	2.67	-.05	-.02	.11	-	-.11**	.16***	.22***	.07	-.12**	-.03	-.02	-	-
5. Contract type	-	-	-	-	.26***	.07	.12*	-.10	-	.01	-.03	-.06	.00	.03	-.04	-	-
6. Organizational tenure	7.82	6.74	6.36	6.39	-.05	.39***	-.06	.22**	-.11	-	.02	-.06	.05	-.14**	.01	-	-
7. Organizational dehumanization	4.04	1.59	3.91	1.51	.01	-.02	-.04	.26***	.04	.06	(95/.94)	.50***	-.53***	.43***	-.50***	-	-
8. Psychological need thwarting	3.55	1.35	3.50	1.32	.09	-.03	.10	.18**	.05	.05	.64***	(91/.91)	-.49***	.53***	-.57***	-	-
9. Affective commitment	4.06	1.57	4.33	1.67	.00	.07	-.01	-.19***	-.05	.02	-.65***	-.52***	(92/.90)	-.57***	.68***	-	-
10. Turnover intentions	3.80	2.03	3.59	1.99	.00	-.06	-.00	.02	.07	-.06	.60***	.55***	-.67***	(92/.93)	-.70***	-	-
11. Job satisfaction	4.70	1.61	4.75	1.65	.00	-.03	.03	-.12*	.02	-.06	-.55***	-.53***	.70***	-.66***	(92/.93)	-	-
12. Psychological strains	3.08	1.28	-	-	.19***	-.06	.06	.00	.05	.06	.24***	.36***	-.21***	.32***	-.29***	(.77/---)	-
13. Absenteeism	4.88	9.13	-	-	.07	.07	.06	.05	-.06	.02	.12*	.12*	-.21***	.11*	-.15**	.18**	(.77/---)

Note. $N_{\text{study1}} = 340$, $N_{\text{study2}} = 603$. Correlation coefficients are below the diagonal for Study 1 and above the diagonal for Study 2. Reliability alpha

values are on the diagonal (Study 1/Study 2). The reliability of absenteeism was estimated using the Spearman-Brown formula because it was

represented by only two indicators. Gender was coded 0 for *male* and 1 for *female*. Education was coded 1 for *did not complete high school*, 2 for

high school, 3 for *some college*, 4 for *bachelor's degree*, 5 for *master's degree*, and 6 for *Ph.D.* Organizational size was coded 1 for *1-9 employees*, 2 for *10-49 employees*, 3 for *50-249 employees*, 4 for *250-499 employees*, 5 for *500-999 employees*, 6 for *1000-4999 employees*, 7 for *5000-9999 employees* and 8 for *more than 10000 employees*. Contract type was coded 0 for *part-time* and 1 for *full-time*.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3*Fit Indices of Measurement Models for Study 1*

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI	SCF	$\Delta\chi^2_{SB}$	Δdf
1. Seven-factor model	1499.31	678	.06	.06	.92	.91	1.10	-	-
2. Six-factor model (OD and psychological need thwarting = 1 factor)	2785.94	687	.10	.09	.79	.77	1.11	700.31***	9
3. Six-factor model (OD and job satisfaction = factor)	2194.76	684	.08	.09	.85	.83	1.11	356.09***	6
4. Six-factor model (OD and affective commitment = 1 factor)	2114.19	684	.08	.08	.86	.84	1.11	320.80***	6
5. Six-factor model (OD and turnover intentions = 1 factor)	1995.606	684	.08	.08	.87	.86	1.10	291.49***	6
6. Six-factor model (OD and psychological strains = 1 factor)	2180.701	684	.08	.08	.85	.84	1.10	487.01***	6
7. Six-factor model (OD and absenteeism = 1 factor)	1813.779	684	.07	.07	.89	.88	1.11	157.32***	6
8. Six-factor model (psychological need thwarting and job satisfaction = 1 factor)	2708.46	687	.09	.09	.80	.88	1.11	703.08***	9
9. Six-factor model (psychological need thwarting and affective commitment = 1 factor)	2818.36	687	.10	.08	.78	.77	1.11	839.21***	9
10. Six-factor model (psychological need thwarting and turnover intentions = 1 factor)	2539.54	687	.90	.08	.81	.80	1.11	590.61***	9
11. Six-factor model (psychological need thwarting and psychological strains = 1 factor)	2429.22	687	.09	.07	.82	.81	1.11	588.95***	9
12. Six-factor model (psychological need thwarting and absenteeism = 1 factor)	2328.74	687	.08	.08	.83	.82	1.09	2337.73***	9
13. Three-factor model (job satisfaction, psychological strains, absenteeism, affective commitment, and turnover intentions = 1 factor)	2929.91	696	.10	.08	.77	.76	1.10	1274.37***	18
14. Two-factor model (psychological need thwarting, job satisfaction, psychological strains, absenteeism, affective commitment, and turnover intentions = 1 factor)	4121.94	701	.12	.09	.65	.63	1.11	1847.58***	23
15. One-factor model	4940.84	702	.13	.10	.57	.55	1.13	2060.40***	24

Note. $N = 340$. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; SCF = scaling correction factor; $\Delta\chi^2_{\text{SB}}$ = strictly positive Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference test; OD = organizational dehumanization.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4*Fit Indices of Measurement Models for Study 2*

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI	SCF	$\Delta\chi^2_{SB}$	Δdf
1. Five-factor model	1079.17	392	.05	.05	.95	.94	1.17	-	-
2. Four-factor model (OD and psychological need thwarting = 1 factor)	3695.86	399	.12	.12	.74	.71	1.20	1277.96***	7
3. Four-factor model (OD and job satisfaction = 1 factor)	2630.31	396	.10	.11	.82	.80	1.18	849.39***	4
4. Four-factor model (OD and affective commitment = 1 factor)	1985.526	396	.08	.09	.87	.86	1.18	500.58***	4
5. Four-factor model (OD and turnover intentions = 1 factor)	2487.57	396	.09	.10	.83	.82	1.18	698.08***	4
6. Four-factor model (psychological need thwarting and job satisfaction = 1 factor)	3124.14	399	.11	.08	.78	.76	1.18	1323.40***	7
7. Four-factor model (psychological need thwarting and affective commitment = 1 factor)	2814.18	399	.10	.09	.81	.79	1.19	906.11***	7
8. Four-factor model (psychological need thwarting and turnover intentions = 1 factor)	2989.96	399	.10	.08	.79	.77	1.19	944.09***	7
9. Three-factor model (job satisfaction, affective commitment, and turnover intentions = 1 factor)	2198.97	399	.09	.05	.86	.84	1.19	630.45***	7
10. Two-factor model (psychological need thwarting, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and turnover intentions = 1 factor)	4358.37	404	.13	.08	.69	.67	1.21	1610.46***	12
11. One-factor model	6413.90	405	.16	.12	.52	.48	1.22	2459.40***	13

Note. $N = 603$. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit

index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; SCF = scaling correction factor; $\Delta\chi^2_{SB}$ = strictly positive Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference test; OD = organizational dehumanization.

*** $p < .001$.

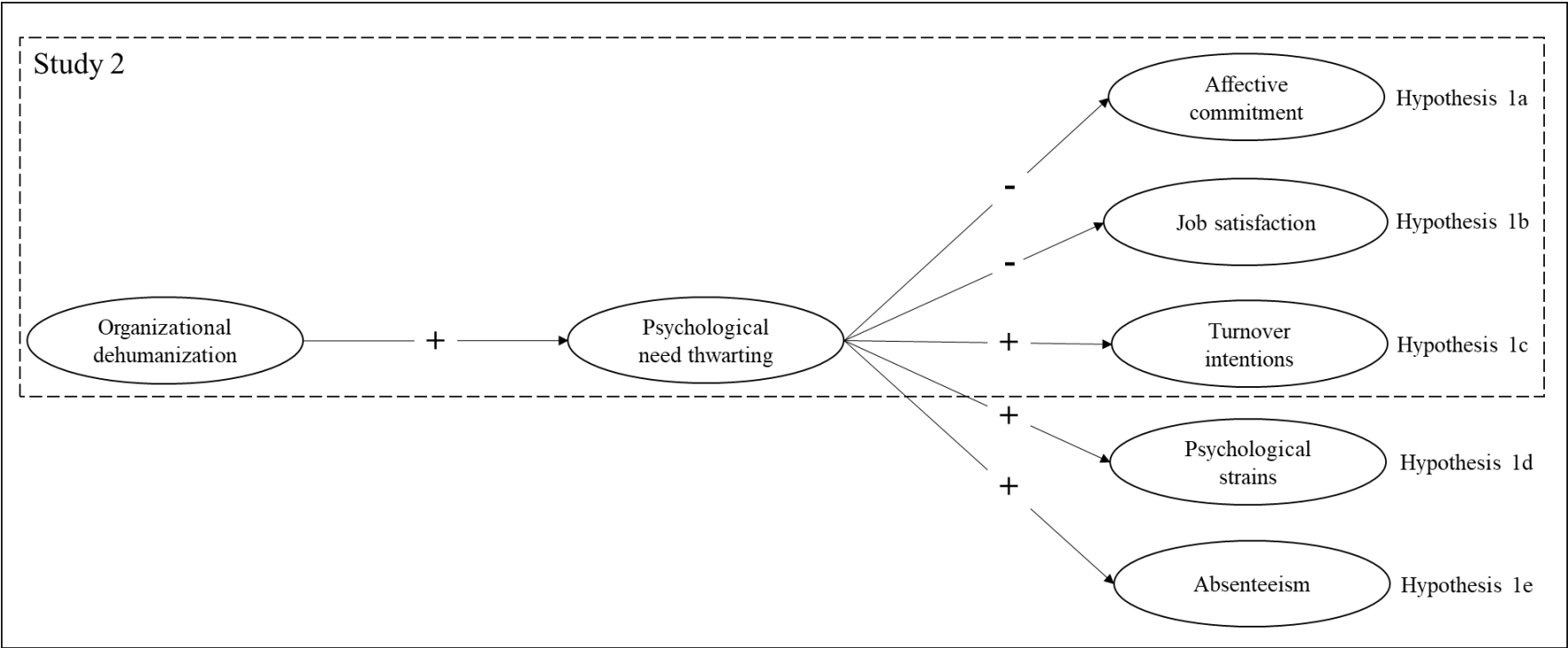
Table 5*Indirect Effects for the Mediation Analyses*

Antecedent	Mediator	Outcome	Study 1		Study 2	
			Estimate	95% CI ^a	Estimate	95% CI ^a
OD	Psychological need thwarting	Affective commitment	-.26	[-.40; -.13]	-.26	[-.32; -.21]
OD	Psychological need thwarting	Turnover intentions	.35	[.21; .49]	.34	[.29; .40]
OD	Psychological need thwarting	Job satisfaction	-.51	[-.61; -.40]	-.40	[-.46; -.34]
OD	Psychological need thwarting	Psychological strains	.33	[.24; .43]	-	-
OD	Psychological need thwarting	Absenteeism	.12	[.04; .20]	-	-

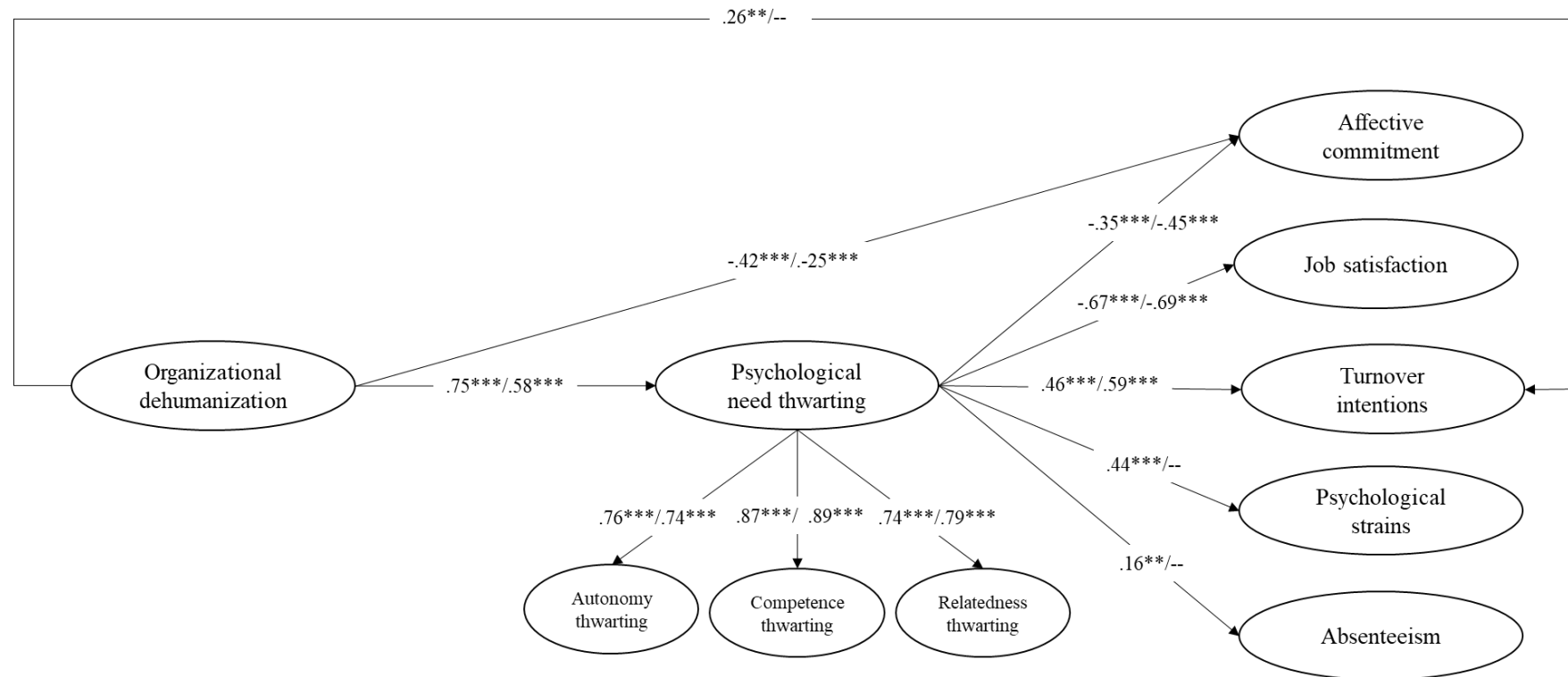
Note. OD = organizational dehumanization. CI = confidence interval. ^aBased on 10,000 samples bootstrapping.

Figure 1

Theoretical Model



Study 1

Figure 2*Standardized Coefficients for the Retained Structural Equation Models*

Note. $N_{\text{study1}} = 340/N_{\text{study2}} = 603$. For Study 2, organizational dehumanization was measured at T1 while psychological need thwarting, affective commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions were measured at T2.

$^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.