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Abusive Supervision

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leadership, counterproductive work behavior, work attitudes, well-being, performance

Abstract

The overarching purpose of this article is to review and synthesize the accumulated evidence that explores the causes and consequences of abusive supervision in work organizations. Our review is organized in three sections. In the first section, we discuss research trends and provide clarification regarding the pressing and not-so-pressing problems with the way that abusive supervision is ordinarily conceptualized and studied. In the second section, we highlight problems and prospects in research on the consequences of abusive supervision. In the third section, we turn our attention to the growing body of research that explores the antecedent conditions and processes that explain when abusive supervision is more or less likely to occur. Throughout the article, we offer an overview of what has been learned over the past 15-plus years and highlight unanswered questions that warrant examination in future studies.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers and practitioners have long been interested in the behavior of organizational leaders, from first-line supervisors to C-suite executives. Scholarly work on the topic suggests that individuals occupying leadership positions perform an assortment of behaviors that ranges from clarifying responsibilities, to delegating authority, to offering an inspiring vision of the future that challenges the status quo (Bass 2008). Although history is replete with examples of leaders whose behavioral repertoire includes hostility against their direct reports, it is only in the past 20 years that we have seen rigorous scholarship devoted to understanding the causes and consequences of subordinate-targeted behaviors such as uncontrolled outbursts, inappropriate blaming, and public ridicule. When referring to these kinds of behaviors, researchers have used several terms including petty tyranny, supervisor aggression, and supervisor undermining. Here, we employ the term that scholars seem to use most frequently, abusive supervision.

In the nearly 17 years since the abusive supervision construct was introduced (see Tepper 2000), a significant body of relevant empirical work has accumulated. **Figure 1** provides an overview of the number of published articles that reported associations between abusive supervision and other constructs. To clarify trends, we report the number of papers published in each of three five-year periods from 2001 to 2015. Within those windows we also report the number of published papers that examined theoretically informed antecedents of abusive supervision. Close study of this figure reveals three important trends in the relatively short history of abusive supervision research. First, the number of published papers on the topic has grown exponentially. Focusing on the total number of published empirical works, 14 articles were published between 2001 and 2005, 62 between 2006 and 2010, and 152 between 2011 and 2015. In other words, roughly two-thirds of the research on abusive supervision has been published in the most recent five-year period. A second trend is that interest seems to be growing with respect to the antecedents of abusive supervision. Published papers on antecedent variables numbered zero prior to 2006, 14 from 2006 to 2010, and 45 from 2011 to 2015. Particularly in the past six years, scholars have with increasing frequency taken up the constructs and processes that explain when abusive supervision is more or less likely to be observed. The third trend is that even with the evidence of an upswing in work on antecedents we continue to see much more interest in the consequences of abusive supervision. During the three respective five-year windows, the percentage of papers that have examined antecedents has increased from 0% to 22% to 30%.

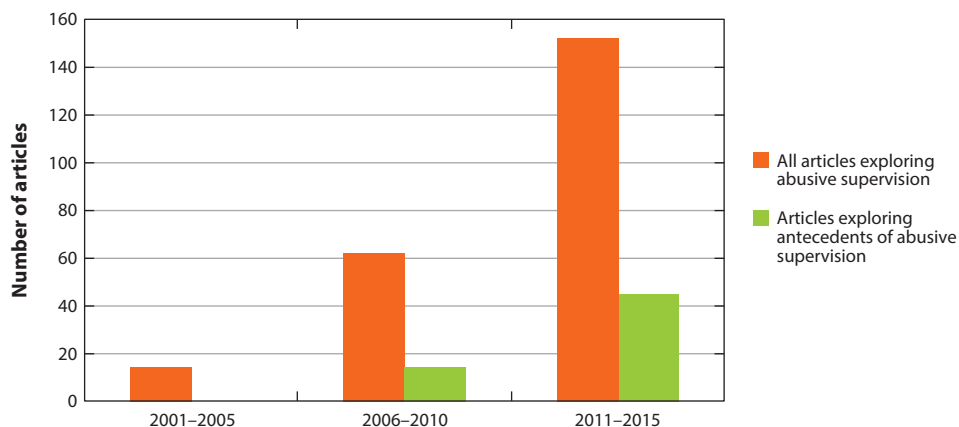


Figure 1

Published articles on abusive supervision between 2001 and 2015.

When there were still only a handful of published papers on abusive supervision, Tepper (2007) offered a review of that nascent literature. Because 10 years have passed since that review appeared in print and the rate of research production has in the meantime increased by a factor of 10, the time seems right for an update and analysis of where the field stands now. In some respects, our examination of the literature is made easier by the recent publication of three quantitative reviews of the abusive supervision literature (i.e., Mackey et al. 2015, Schyns & Schilling 2013, Zhang & Liao 2015). We can with confidence render two general conclusions from a close reading of this meta-analytic work. First, exposure to abusive supervision is rare. We can only estimate the frequency with which abusive supervision occurs, and there are valid reasons to be skeptical of the percentages that have been reported. It has been argued that estimates of abusive supervision are inflated by a tendency on the part of some targets to perceive abuse that has not actually occurred or to interpret non-abusive behavior as abusive (Brees et al. 2016). Others have pointed out that it is no less likely that abusive supervision rates may be under-reported because many targets are fearful of acknowledging their experiences as victims, even when reports can be made anonymously (Tepper et al. 2006). These disclaimers notwithstanding, the available evidence puts the percentage of abused employees at approximately 10%. One outlier appears to be college athletics, where the incidence of leader abuse by coaches may be three times higher than what is observed in traditional industry sectors (see Tepper 2015, Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al. 2015).

The second conclusion that may be derived from the study of relevant literature is that exposure to abusive supervision is associated with a broad range of dysfunctional outcomes that are observed at both the individual and team levels. Abusive supervision has been linked with lower levels of individual and group morale, executive functioning, and psychological health, as well as higher levels of counterproductive work behavior (CWB) and quit rates. Although there appears to be a pervasive lay belief that abusive leader behavior can be productive (Tepper 2016), one that has been embraced by a handful of scholars (e.g., Bies et al. 2016), there is little empirical evidence suggesting that outcomes improve as abusive supervision increases. The lone result suggesting otherwise—Lee et al.'s (2013) finding of an inverted U-shaped relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity—has not been replicated in other studies. To be sure, scholars have identified circumstances that weaken the injurious effects of abusive supervision. As examples, evidence suggests that abusive supervision is not as detrimental for targeted subordinates who have greater job mobility (Tepper 2000), engage in more acts of upward hostility against their supervisor (Tepper et al. 2015), are co-targeted rather than singled out for abuse (Duffy et al. 2006), and whose supervisors eschew supportive leadership behaviors (Duffy et al. 2002). However, although there appear to be situations in which abusive supervision is less harmful, there is little support for the assertion that desirable outcomes accrue when supervisors are more rather than less abusive.

We build on this meta-analytic work by offering an admittedly more subjective qualitative overview of the state of abusive supervision research. Our overarching goals are to provide scholars and practitioners with an evidence-based understanding of what is known and not known about abusive supervision and to offer recommendations for future research on the topic. Along the way, we recognize concerns about the conceptualization and operationalization of abusive supervision. In reviewing the concerns about abusive supervision research, we dig into issues that have been expressed in prior published work, as well as recurring themes that appear in reviews of papers that are submitted for publication. The latter is based on the authors' collective experience as reviewers on dozens of submissions to some of the most highly prized outlets in which organizational psychology and organizational behavior scholars publish (e.g., *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and *Personnel Psychology*). We acknowledge at the outset that Martinko et al. (2013) published a qualitative review of the abusive supervision literature just a few years ago. For reasons that we make clear below,

our analysis of the pressing problems, prospects, and way forward in abusive supervision research differs from the analysis offered by Martinko et al.

Our examination of the abusive supervision literature is organized in three sections. The first section offers a review of fundamental conceptual and methodological issues in abusive supervision research. Our goal here is to clarify for prospective authors the true challenges and opportunities in abusive supervision research. The second section discusses issues and opportunities involving model specification in studies of the consequences of abusive supervision. The third section provides an overview of theory and research that pertains to the mechanisms that explain when and why abusive supervision occurs. Here, we synthesize prior work on the antecedent conditions that are associated with the occurrence of abusive supervision. In all three sections, we propose directions for future research and offer guidance for individuals interested in pursuing research on abusive supervision.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES (AND NONISSUES) IN ABUSIVE SUPERVISION RESEARCH

Subjectivity and Objectivity in the Study of Abusive Supervision

In the article that introduced the construct, Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as, “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (p. 178), and operationalized abusive supervision by asking employees to report the frequency with which their immediate supervisors perform various hostile acts (e.g., “tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid,” “puts me down in front of others,” “blames me to save himself/herself embarrassment”). An important feature of the conceptual definition, one that has been a source of confusion and misplaced criticism, has to do with the characterization of abusive supervision as a subjective perception.

From the construct’s inception, those contributing rigorous scholarship to the domain (i.e., the kind of research that has found a home in the finest outlets in organizational behavior and industrial and organizational psychology) have assumed that subordinate reports of abusive supervision reflect a subjective evaluation and have never claimed that these reports capture supervisors’ behavior in an objective sense. However, critics of abusive supervision research have expressed the concern that contributions to the literature are not always precise in acknowledging that their work focuses on “employee appraised abusive supervision” rather than objective indications of “abusive supervisor behavior” (Chan & McAllister 2014, p. 58; see also Martinko et al. 2013). Their concern would be alleviated, say the critics, if authors were to aim for greater objectivity in abusive supervision assessments by capturing and examining agreement between independent evaluators (e.g., multiple peers) or by making clear that their focus is on perceived abusive supervision. Regarding the first proposed “solution,” we point out that agreement among subjective perceptions of leader behavior does not make for objectivity. Beyond the fact that intersubjective agreement with respect to any social phenomenon does not provide evidence of objective truth (Longino 1990), the dominant view among scholars is that those in leadership positions vary their behavior across direct reports (Dansereau et al. 1975, Liden et al. 1997). Also worth noting is that CWB—of which abusive supervision is one form—is often performed covertly, unseen by observers or in a manner that perpetrators can shrug off as innocent misunderstandings (Aquino et al. 1999). In other words, when it comes to perceptions of abusive supervisor behavior, inter-subordinate disagreement is to be expected and may better reflect reality than does agreement.

As for the second proposed solution, our sense is that repeated use of phrasing such as, “perceived abuse,” or “perceived abusive supervision,” is not necessary if at the outset authors

embrace the prevailing conception of abusive supervision—that is, Tepper’s (2000) construct definition. In terms of aesthetics, repeatedly inserting the word, “perceived,” yields clumsy prose, much as it would if scholars were to repeatedly use the word, “perceived,” when referring to other frequently examined organizational behavior/industrial organizational psychology constructs such as transformational leadership, organizational citizenship behavior, stress, and identity. In this article, we hew to tradition by eschewing the word, “perceived,” each and every time we reference the construct, while stipulating that when we employ the term, “abuse” or “abusive,” we are making no presumptions about the world outside the minds of the informants whose construals we hope to understand.

The Phenomenological Experience of Supervisory Abuse

A more vexing matter is that subordinates who believe themselves to be targets of the behaviors comprising the abusive supervision content domain may not evaluate their supervisory leaders as abusive. Ferris et al. (2007), Tepper et al. (2011), and Bies et al. (2016) point to renowned individuals such as Bobby Knight, Vince Lombardi, and Steve Jobs and to the context of military drill sergeants to illustrate that direct reports may perceive perpetrators of the abusive supervision behavior repertoire to be abrasive (i.e., gruff, prickly) or brokers in “tough love” rather than abusive (i.e., cruel, malevolent, vicious). Tepper (2000) acknowledged that there is likely to be subjectivity associated with perceptions of supervisory abusiveness: “The same individual could view a supervisor’s behavior as abusive in one context and as non-abusive in another context, and two subordinates could differ in their evaluations of the same supervisor’s behavior” (p. 178). To date, however, models of abusive supervision have not accounted for the possibility that there may be divergence between subjective assessments of abusive supervisor behavior, as it is defined by scholars, and followers’ phenomenological experience of having been abused. The lack of relevant scholarly attention to this issue means that it is unclear whether the phenomenological experience of abuse has implications for outcomes that have been linked with the perception that one has been the target of abusive supervisory behavior.

Here we call for theory and research that distinguish between supervisory abuse as a formative behavioral repertoire and abuse as reflective evaluation of whether supervisory leaders meet an unusually strong standard for destructiveness and insensitivity (see Podsakoff et al. 2003, for a discussion of formative and reflective indicators in leadership research). To clarify, we are referring to two related, but distinguishable subjective perceptions, one of which speaks to what supervisory leaders do (e.g., derogatory comments, uncontrolled outbursts, strategic undermining behavior) and one of which addresses employees’ attitudes toward their supervisors (i.e., the use of the label, “abusive,” to describe their supervisors and/or supervisors’ behavior). The sort of research we are inviting is exemplified in studies that have explored targets’ and third parties’ willingness to use the label, “sexual harassment,” to characterize behavior that comports with that concept’s legal definition (e.g., Magley et al. 1999, Munson et al. 2001). The paradigm used in studies of sexual harassment could be adapted to explore two kinds of questions that are of fundamental importance to our understanding of abusive supervision.

One kind of question has to do with the conditions under which the abusive supervision repertoire is associated with evaluations of supervisors as, “abusive.” If we assume that in the minds of individuals there is a line that separates supervisory abusiveness and supervisory abrasiveness and that where that line is situated varies across perceivers and over time, we can then ask the question, What factors cause a perceiver to render an evaluation that is to one side of the line or the other? **Figure 2** offers a graphical representation of this research agenda. The left and right sides of the figure capture perceptions of particular supervisors as abrasive and abusive, respectively, with

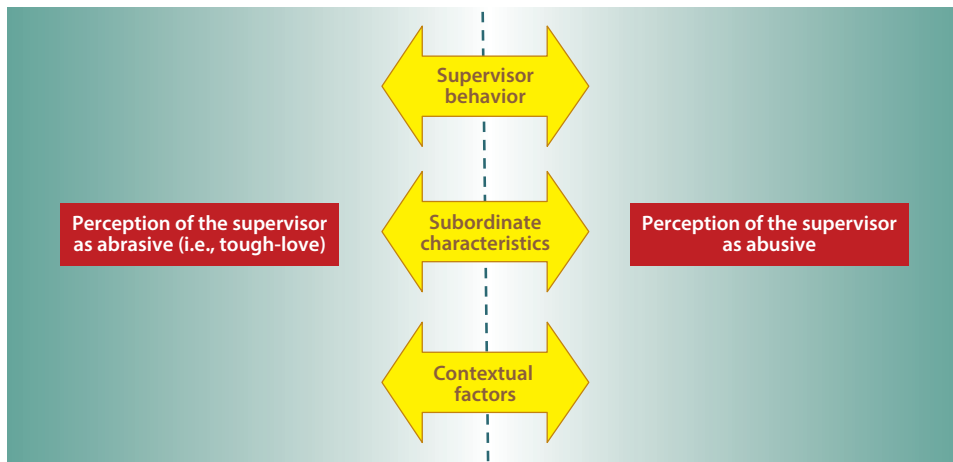


Figure 2

The fuzzy “line” between abusive supervision and abrasive supervision.

deeper green shades reflecting stronger or more intense perceptions as we move further away from the bifurcating vertical line. The double-arrows residing along the line capture factors that push target perceptions in the direction of increasing abrasiveness or abusiveness. Within the double-arrows, we highlight three illustrative categories of influences on the perception of supervisors as abrasive or abusive: supervisor behavior, subordinate characteristics, and contextual factors.

With respect to the first category, it may be that the behaviors from the abusive supervision repertoire are not equally likely to evoke perceptions of abuse. Perhaps the abuse label is more likely to be applied when supervisors perform cold and calculating actions that reflect hostile intent or ambivalence about the target’s well-being (e.g., blaming subordinates for the supervisor’s own mistakes) compared to when supervisors perform acts for which intent is not always clear (e.g., invading the subordinate’s privacy). It also seems likely that evaluations of supervisors, from strongly abrasive to strongly abusive, depend on the frequency with which supervisors perform behaviors from the abusive supervision repertoire. We would think that the abuse label is more likely to be applied when, for example, public outbursts, derogatory name calling, inappropriate blaming, and credit taking are not odd occurrences but indicative of a sustained behavioral pattern.

The second double-arrow in **Figure 2**, subordinate characteristics, captures the idea that not all targets have the same reaction to/assessment of supervisors who perform acts from the abusive supervision behavioral domain. So, for example, subordinate targets of what scholars call abusive supervision may be more likely to perceive their supervisors to be abusive when they believe themselves to be deserving of special treatment (i.e., high in narcissism or psychological entitlement) or are unusually sensitive to the possibility that others are “out to get them” (i.e., low in dispositional trust or high in trait paranoia). The research agenda that we are encouraging departs from a series of studies that have examined links between subordinate personality and abusive supervision. From these studies, scholars have concluded that supervisors are perceived to be more abusive by subordinates who have a hostile attribution style (Martinko et al. 2011); feel more entitled (Harvey et al. 2014); and are less agreeable, emotionally stable, and extroverted (Brees et al. 2014). However, because abusive supervisor behavior but not perceived abuse was assessed in these studies, they do not speak directly to the question that ostensibly motivated the research to begin with: Are some individuals more likely than others to believe that they have been abused by their supervisor?

The third double-arrow in **Figure 2** captures contextual factors that influence when performance of behaviors from the abusive supervision content domain is likely to be perceived as abuse. We might speculate that the abuse label is less likely to be applied in organizations or cultures where abusive supervision is more normative, when team performance is exceptional, or under conditions of crisis. In situations such as these, what scholars have referred to as abusive supervision may be perceived to be acceptable (Tepper et al. 2011a). These ideas beg the question, Are there circumstances in which the “abuse” label has no relevance? So, for example, does the concept of supervisory abuse have any meaning with respect to military leaders? Or is it the case that in any particular context, including the military, there is a portfolio of behaviors that constitutes supervisory abuse? The challenge would then be to elucidate what it means to be abused by supervisors in different contexts.

A second set of questions addresses the role that the abuse label plays in explaining outcomes that have been linked with the abusive supervision repertoire in prior research. So, for example, does the abuse label explain the relationships between abusive supervision and individual and team morale, well-being, and performance? In other words, must targets believe or report that they have been abused for the behaviors (that scholars define as abuse) to translate into injury? Evidence suggests that targets of behaviors that fit the legal definition of sexual harassment experience psychological injury independent of whether they believe that their experiences constitute sexual harassment (Magley et al. 1999, Munson et al. 2001). Is the same true of targets of abusive supervisor behavior, or must subordinates perceive their supervisors as abusive for injury to be experienced?

Data Sources in Studies of Abusive Supervision

Most studies of abusive supervision operationalize the focal construct with evaluations supplied by employees who are asked to use as their referent the supervisor to whom they report directly. This is typical of research in the leadership domain. Soliciting subordinate reports in abusive supervision research is also in keeping with the kinds of questions that have evoked scholarly interest. In general, abusive supervision researchers have been interested in understanding the thought processes of victims. But the supervisors’ perspective on their own abusive behavior can also be informative. The preponderance of research on CWB—of which abusive supervision is an example—relies on employee self-reports. The popularity of the self-report paradigm in CWB research reflects the general belief that CWB is not always visible to observers and targets and that it is often the case that only the perpetrator is positioned to acknowledge that CWB has occurred. A concern about using self-reports of CWB is that individuals may not be willing to admit that they execute acts that could be harmful to others.

But in two articles that are exceptions to the reliance on subordinate reports in abusive supervision research, Johnson et al.’s (2012) weekly examination of the relationship between leader identity and daily leadership behavior and Lin et al.’s (2016) daily study of the relationship between ethical leadership and abusive supervision mean levels of abusive supervision were similar to what has been observed in studies that rely on subordinate reports. These studies tell us that range restriction (owing to a presumed general reluctance on the part of supervisors to acknowledge their own abusiveness) was not a problem in that their work provided support for the authors’ respective central theses. Johnson et al. (2012) found that individual identity—self-definitions based on one’s separateness or distinctiveness from others—was associated with abusive supervision; Lin et al. (2016) found that ethical leadership predicted abusive supervision through processes of moral licensing and ego depletion. We must acknowledge that supervisor reports on abusive supervision are no more objective than are reports supplied by subordinates. But an alternative

to subordinate reports can be informative, and we therefore encourage scholars to include supervisor self-reports of abusive supervision when the research questions are relevant and doing so is practicable.

Objective Consequences of Abusive Supervision

Although we are skeptical of efforts to study abusive supervision itself objectively, we see tremendous value in expanding the domain of correlates to include objective indicators of leader effectiveness. Understudied outcomes that warrant examination include employee and team performance, withdrawal, and well-being.

Performance. The performance consequences of abusive supervision have been examined in only a handful of studies and, with few exceptions, performance has been assessed with performance ratings supplied by the supervisor. Although there is something to be learned when examining “soft” indicators of performance, actual performance often diverges from performance evaluations (Bommer et al. 1995). Also important, relying on soft measures of performance in studies of abusive supervision engenders a unique confound because one way of executing abuse is to do so through performance evaluations—to rate employees less favorably than their performance genuinely warrants. Indeed, social psychologists have used performance rating exercises to capture the extent to which those in leadership positions derogate direct reports (Georgeson & Harris 1998). When exploring relationships between subordinate-reported abusive supervision and supervisor-reported evaluations of subordinate performance, scholars may simply be looking at the same construct from different perspectives. What is needed is research that examines relationships between abusive supervision and objective performance measures. To date, little such research has been conducted. Exceptions are Walter et al.’s (2015) examination of the relationship between abusive supervision and garment employees’ actual output and Detert et al.’s (2007) study of restaurant productivity. Of course not all jobs readily lend themselves to objective performance evaluation. Where possible, however, we would encourage scholars to employ hard measures of work performance in their studies of abusive supervision. And if performance ratings are going to be used, they should be supplied by sources other than the immediate supervisor (e.g., coworkers).

Withdrawal. An impressive body of empirical evidence suggests that abusive supervision is associated with constructs that have been reliably linked with turnover in prior research. These include job satisfaction, intentions to quit, organizational justice, and psychological distress (Tepper 2007), as well as employee engagement (Barnes et al. 2015). However, little is known about how abusive supervision relates to more objective indicators of withdrawal such as tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover. In one study, Tepper (2000) found that abusive supervision positively predicted self-reported voluntary turnover and that this indirect effect was explained by organizational justice perceptions. Clearly, there is a need for a more nuanced examination of the quitting behavior of abused employees. Future research should examine the incremental predictive power of abusive supervision (relative to better-established predictors) in the process by which abused subordinates make the decision to quit their jobs or to execute other forms of withdrawal such as absenteeism and tardiness. Some specific questions to be explored include the following: (a) Do abused employees quit because of an accumulation of dissatisfaction over time or do particular instances of abuse constitute “shocks” that lead to quitting with little to no deliberation (Lee & Mitchell 1994); (b) does the withdrawal process differ for employees who perceive their supervisors to be abusive versus those who perceive their bosses to be unethical or to simply not meet their needs for more functional forms of leader behavior (i.e., task-oriented or supportive; Lambert

et al. 2012); and (c) what role does country culture play in explaining how individuals withdraw from abusive supervision?

Well-being. In several studies, exposure to abusive supervision has been linked with subjective perceptions of psychological well-being such as depression (Tepper et al. 2007) and self-regulation impairment (Thau & Mitchell 2010). This work suggests that targets of abusive supervision report symptomatology that bears striking similarities to those diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. A promising direction for future research involves examining the conditions under which abusive supervision relates to objective indicators of well-being such as somatic complaints, cortisol levels, insomnia, doctor visits, healthcare claims, and self-medicating behavior. There are good reasons to expect that abusive supervision will explain variance in these health outcomes. As Ganster & Rosen's (2013) allostatic model of the stress process reminds us, stressors such as abusive supervision can impact individuals' immune, cardiovascular, and metabolic systems.

Experimental Study of Abusive Supervision

With just a handful of exceptions, published studies of abusive supervision have employed field survey methods. The typical study design involves asking supervised employees to complete lengthy surveys that include, among other things, Tepper's (2000) 15-item abusive supervision scale or a variant of that scale. In weaker survey studies, abusive supervision and its presumed antecedents and consequences are captured at the same time and from the perspective of one source—usually the employee. More robust correlational studies employ research designs that incorporate time lags (e.g., Tepper et al. 2011); repeated measures (e.g., Simon et al. 2015); and/or reports from other sources such as supervisors (e.g., Zellars et al. 2002), coworkers (Priesemuth et al. 2014), or family members (e.g., Hoobler & Brass 2006). But even these design features have their limitations, the most important being that they cannot offer the level of causal inference that experimental research can provide.

In a handful of instances, scholars have brought experimental methods to the study of abusive supervision, but these efforts have run into problems of another sort. A challenge for scholars aiming to study abusive supervision experimentally has to do with issues of ecological validity. This problem is illustrated in a recent study by Brees et al. (2016). In this research, study participants were asked to imagine working for a supervisor depicted in a video vignette and to then forecast whether that supervisor would be likely to use behaviors from the abusive supervision repertoire. In another vignette study, Walter et al. (2015) asked subjects to play the role of supervisor and to report their likelihood of using abusive behaviors with a “paper-and-pencil” subordinate that varied in terms of job performance, outcome dependence, and likeability. Exercises such as these provide insights about the implicit theories that speak to the circumstances under which abusive supervision is employed. But it is less certain that this kind of research reveals much about actual employees' perceptions of or inclination to use behaviors from the abusive supervision repertoire.

An experimental study with better ecological validity is Rodgers et al.'s (2013) examination of subjects' responses to leader credit taking, a form of leader abuse that is captured by Tepper's (2000) scale. In this research, subjects performed a mundane laboratory task under one of two experimental conditions, credit sharing or credit taking. All participants were informed that their performance achieved the 95th percentile and that their leader had discretion over the subsequent allocation of rewards. In the credit-sharing condition, the leader properly credited and rewarded subjects for their performance; in the credit-taking condition, the leader took credit for subjects' performance. When given the opportunity to allocate time and effort to working on another task with their leader, subjects were willing to commit more time and performed more work when

they “reported to” leaders who shared credit compared to those who took credit. Porath & Erez’s (2007) second in a series of studies about the relationship between rudeness and task performance provides another good example of the kind of experimental work that could be adapted by scholars who aim to bring abusive supervision to the laboratory. In this research, subjects experienced one of two experimental conditions—rudeness by a confederate authority figure or control—and then participated in two problem-solving tasks. Subjects in the rudeness condition scored lower on independently coded measures of creativity, flexibility, and helpfulness. A third exemplar is Melwani & Barsade’s (2011) examination of the relationship between supervisory feedback and subordinates’ interpersonal aggression and task performance. In this experimental work, subjects were randomly assigned to one of four feedback conditions, one of which involved supervisory contempt and captured expressions of scorn and ridicule for subjects’ performance on an earlier trial. The authors found that subjects in the contempt condition engaged in more interpersonal aggression and performed better than those who received angry, failure, or neutral feedback. The link with performance is noteworthy because it suggests that at least one manifestation of leader abuse can improve the work performance of direct reports (albeit in a laboratory setting).

To be sure, experimental research of the sort Rodgers et al. (2013), Porath & Erez (2007), and Melwani & Barsade (2011) conducted does not capture the richness, complexity, and personal investment that we associate with real-world leader-follower relationships. Indeed, Porath & Erez’s rudeness manipulation was of low intensity and delivered by a third party rather than a confederate leader. But in some important respects, their work provides a better blueprint for experimental examination of abusive supervision than does other experimental research of which we are aware. These authors demonstrate that scholars need not rely on subjects’ imaginings when studying abusive supervision in the lab. Manipulating or simply measuring exposure to hostility in the lab may not be easy, but they are doable and provide insights in which we can have confidence and draw meaningful comparisons to what emerges in field studies.

MODEL SPECIFICATION IN STUDIES OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION

With more than 200 articles now in print, it is fair to say that much has been learned about the consequences of exposure to abusive supervision. Literature maturation is characterized by steadily increasing sophistication in the models that scholars test, and even a cursory examination of the literature would lead to the conclusion that the abusive supervision models scholars are testing now are more complicated and theoretically bold than are the models that were tested during the years immediately following the construct’s introduction. But as we reflect on the next phase of abusive supervision research, a pernicious problem that warrants attention is the inclination on the part of scholars to develop and test underspecified models. Piecemeal modeling is apparent throughout the abusive supervision literature, and this has left us with a body of findings that is sometimes difficult to integrate and to derive overarching themes from. Here we highlight three areas of research in which scholars could and should aim for bolder contributions: coping with abusive supervision, the pathways connecting abusive supervision to distal outcomes, and positioning abusive supervision within more comprehensive models of leader behavior.

Coping with Abusive Supervision

Inspired by the overwhelming evidence suggesting that exposure to abusive supervision is associated with behavioral, cognitive, and affective injury, scholars have conducted dozens of studies of the coping capabilities of subordinate targets. On its face, one might be heartened at the

commitment that scholars have made to understand how subordinates avoid and/or overcome the injury that abusive supervision engenders. Unfortunately, there may be no subdomain of abusive supervision research that is more disjointed than is the rather large body of work that touches on coping. As a result, the research to date has not produced straightforward answers to fundamental questions such as, How do employees cope with abusive supervision and what coping strategies are most effective? In this section we briefly discuss the kinds of coping studies that scholars have conducted and explain why the practical yield from these studies has been less than satisfying.

The features of abused subordinates' coping that scholars have examined fall into three categories: (a) the individual differences that influence how effectively subordinates cope with abusive supervision, (b) the coping strategies that abused subordinates prefer and eschew, and (c) the comparative effectiveness of abused subordinates' coping strategies. The typical Category 1 study tests a model in which an individual difference variable is positioned as a moderator of the relationship between abusive supervision and indicators of coping effectiveness (i.e., subjective well-being and work motivation). Evidence from these studies suggests that targets of abusive supervision cope more effectively when they are less susceptible to emotional contagion (Wu & Hu 2009), higher in emotional intelligence (Hu 2012), more socially adaptable (Mackey et al. 2013), and higher in core self-evaluations (Zhang et al. 2014). A limitation of these studies is that they do not model subordinates' coping behavior; they tell us who copes effectively with abusive supervision but they do not tell us what they do that works.

Category 2 consists of studies that examine abused subordinates' coping preferences. This is the largest of the three categories and it includes studies that link abusive supervision with its most frequently studied outcome variable—subordinates' performance of hostile acts directed against the supervisor, coworkers, organization, and family members (for a review see Tepper & Almeda 2012). This category also includes studies that have revealed relationships between abusive supervision and subordinates' problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach 2006), withdrawal behavior (Mawritz et al. 2014a), and voice (Greenbaum et al. 2013). Typically, studies in Category 2 will include individual difference or situational moderators that offer clues as to the conditions under which abused subordinates employ particular coping strategies. Although informative, these studies are limited in that they do not shed light on the effectiveness of the coping strategies that abused subordinates employ. In other words, these studies tell us how subordinates cope, but they do not tell us whether using these strategies affords abused subordinates coping benefits.

Studies that fall into Category 3 explore the efficacy of abused subordinates' coping strategies. In these studies, scholars examine the moderating effects of coping on the relationships between abusive supervision and various indicators of coping effectiveness. Studies that fall into this category suggest that abused subordinates experience coping benefits when they eschew avoidance behaviors and directly confront supervisors about their transgressive behavior (Frieder et al. 2015, Nandkeolyar et al. 2014, Tepper et al. 2007), perform acts of upward hostility against their supervisor (Tepper et al. 2015), and use ingratiation with their supervisor (Harvey et al. 2007). The major limitation of studies in Category 3 is that they typically model one or two coping strategies and are therefore not able to shed light on the comparative efficacy of abused subordinates' many coping options. To put this point in perspective, evidence suggests that individuals use more than one dozen strategies to cope with threats to psychological well-being that they encounter in their personal and professional lives. These strategies range from developing plans or actively taking steps to remove stressors, to seeking advice or sympathy from others, to not thinking about the stressor or denying that it has happened, to focusing on what has been learned from dealing with the stressor (Carver et al. 1989). This is, of course, just a sampling from the rich assortment of coping strategies that seem to be employed by individuals across a variety of contexts. And because the full range of coping options available to abused subordinates has not been examined

in the research to date, we are not able to answer the most important questions pertaining to coping—why do abused employees select one strategy over another and what strategies are most and least effective? We therefore encourage scholars to examine more comprehensive models of abused subordinates' coping. The following are specific questions that warrant examination: Under what conditions do abused subordinates select one coping strategy over another, and under what conditions are abused subordinates' coping options more or less effective?

Mechanisms Connecting Abusive Supervision and Its Distal Consequences

Another overly piecemealed way in which researchers have approached abusive supervision involves their efforts to model the pathways linking abusive supervision and distal outcomes such as performance contributions, withdrawal, and well-being. A positive trend in the literature is that, over the past 10 years, scholars have with increasing frequency modeled the mechanisms underlying the effects of abusive supervision. This has been an important development because by testing mediated models, scholars have offered direct examination of theoretical perspectives that explain how targets are affected by exposure to supervisory abuse. These theoretical perspectives include displaced aggression, social learning, social exchange, need satisfaction, ego depletion, and affective events, among others. What is problematic is that the mediation frameworks scholars test typically account for one and rarely more than two mechanisms underlying the effects of supervisory abuse. Consequently, the research being conducted is not able to shed light on the relative explanatory power of the theoretical perspectives that seem relevant to understanding abusive supervision.

Take, for example, studies linking abusive supervision and subordinate CWB (e.g., Tepper et al. 2001, Mitchell & Ambrose 2007). Most work on this topic—more than two dozen published articles—has examined direct and moderated effects of abusive supervision without accounting for underlying mechanisms. Evidence from studies that have examined mediators suggests that abusive supervision influences subordinate misbehavior through decreases in affective commitment (Tepper et al. 2008), interactional justice (Wang et al. 2012), need satisfaction (Lian et al. 2012), and perceived organizational support (Shoss et al. 2013), as well as through increases in ego depletion (Thau & Mitchell 2010), hostility (Mayer et al. 2012), and emotional exhaustion (Wheeler et al. 2013). These studies are informative, but they leave us with an incomplete picture of the reasons why subordinates respond to abusive supervision with CWB of their own. Which mechanisms and corresponding theoretical perspectives are more or less important? Do certain mechanisms have more explanatory power under specific circumstances or with respect to specific outcome variables? Studies that address questions such as these would help scholars and practitioners make better sense of the considerable body of research that has accumulated since 2000.

A paper that illustrates the kind of research we would like to see more of is Simon et al.'s (2015) within-person examination of the affective mechanisms explaining monthly exposure to abusive supervision and subordinates' behavioral responses. These authors modeled three affective pathways from abusive supervision and found support for the predictions that abusive supervision influences CWB through increases in anger and supervisor-directed avoidance through increases in fear. Although hypothesized, decreases in compassion did not mediate the abusive supervision–supervisor-directed citizenship behavior pathway.

We would particularly like to see multipathway research that untangles the relationship between abusive supervision and individual and team productivity. The results from rigorous field research suggest that performance declines as abusive supervision increases. Despite that, the belief that abusive supervision can be motivating and performance enhancing is evident in contributions to the popular press (e.g., Marcinko 1997) and in the theorizing of eminent scholars (e.g., Bies et al. 2016). These ideas could and should be put to the test in studies that simultaneously model

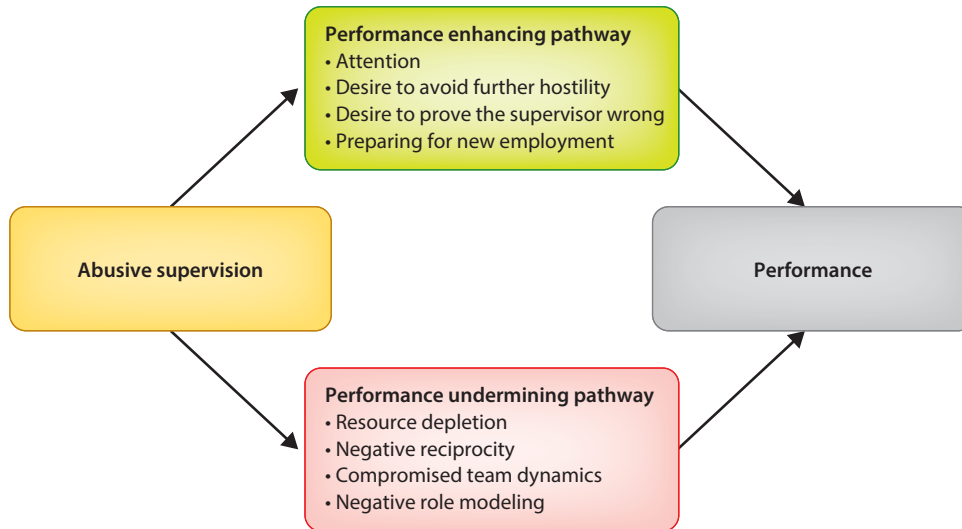


Figure 3

Proposed model capturing the positive and negative pathways from abusive supervision to productivity.

the presumed positive and negative pathways linking abusive supervision and productivity. As illustrated in **Figure 3**, the pathway to enhanced performance would include psychological experiences such as attention, fear of negative evaluation/avoiding further hostility, a desire to prove the supervisor wrong, and preparing for new employment; the performance-undermining pathway would include such things as ego depletion, negative reciprocity, compromised team dynamics, and negative role modeling. To be clear, our reading of the literature is that when supervisors are effective it is in spite of their hostility not because of their hostility. That is, we would expect the performance-undermining pathway to carry a stronger effect than the performance-enhancing pathway. But examining the full gamut of presumed positive and negative effects generated by abusive supervision would clarify what, if any, upsides there are to supervisory abuse.

Positioning Abusive Supervision Within Broader Models of Leader Behavior

For the most part, studies of abusive supervision do not account for the fact that the repertoire of individuals in leadership positions involves a rich portfolio of behaviors that ranges from task-oriented, to supportive, to empowering, to participative, among others. In a handful of studies scholars have explored and found support for the idea that even the most abusive supervisors may also behave supportively and that these supervisors cause more injury than do abusive supervisors who tend to withhold support (e.g., Duffy et al. 2002, Lian et al. 2012, Xu et al. 2015). One explanation for this counterintuitive finding is that supervisors who toggle back and forth between hostile and supportive behavior create more uncertainty in the minds of subordinates and are therefore more resource depleting than are supervisors who are consistent in their hostility.

But beyond this small body of work, little has been done to position abusive supervision within more comprehensive models of leadership behavior. Indeed, recent reviews that ostensibly offer assessments of past, present, and future leadership literature make passing mention of abusive supervision (e.g., Dinh et al. 2014). This may be because abusive supervision fits some definitions of leadership (e.g., leadership as a social influence process; Bass 2008) but not others (e.g., leadership as the ability to mobilize human resources in the pursuit of lofty goals; Bennis 1989). It is not our intention

to enter a debate on the way that scholars define leadership. Rather, we highlight the consensus position that people in leadership positions may perform acts from the abusive supervision repertoire and, therefore, properly specified models of managerial leadership will account for the interplay between abusive supervision and other forms of leader behavior. Research questions that should be explored include, What is the relative importance of abusive supervision in predicting leadership criteria (i.e., individual and team morale, productivity, and well-being) compared to traditionally studied leader behaviors; does abusive supervision influence how subordinates' respond to other forms of leadership; and does (in)competence with respect to more functional forms of leader behavior increase the likelihood that supervisors will "turn to" abusive behaviors to try to get things done? We return to the latter point when we take up the mechanisms leading to abusive supervision.

A related issue pertains to the leadership behavior that supervisors execute toward the peers of focal employees. Most abusive supervision research has been conducted at the level of the individual employee and does not speak to the treatment afforded the focal employee's coworkers. But literature going back more than 50 years suggests that individuals use information about how others are treated when evaluating and responding to the treatment they themselves receive (Festinger 1954). A handful of scholars have applied these ideas to examinations of abusive supervision, the thinking being that the meaning of supervisors' abusive behavior varies depending on whether focal subordinates are the lone targets for supervisory abuse or if the focal subordinates' peers are also targeted. Consistent with predictions that flow from social comparison theorizing, evidence suggests that being singled out strengthens the negative effects of abusive supervision on the referent targets' strain reactions (Huo et al. 2012); perceptions of leader-member exchange and affect-based trust (Peng et al. 2014); self-esteem (Farh & Chen 2014); moral courage (Hannah et al. 2013); and job satisfaction, intent to quit, and depression (Duffy et al. 2006). It seems clear that abused subordinates are affected by the ways supervisors behave toward the focal subordinates' peers. But as we pointed out above, the behavioral options available to individuals in leadership positions go well beyond abuse. And behaviors other than abuse directed at coworkers should also provide social comparison information that influences the cognitions, affect, and behavior of abused subordinates. We therefore encourage scholars to build on the work that has explored abuse of coworkers by accounting for a broader representation of peer-directed leader behaviors.

Summary

In their review, Martinko et al. (2013) argued that "research demonstrating the negative consequences of abusive supervision has reached a saturation point" (p. 758). We infer from this statement that Martinko et al. see little to be gained in continued examination of the downstream effects of abusive supervision. If that is indeed their point, we disagree. From our perspective, the research that has been conducted has only laid the groundwork for a critically important next phase in abusive supervision research. We encourage scholars to build on what has been done by pursuing a richer and bolder research agenda that elucidates the consequences of supervisory abuse. Specifically, it is our hope that scholars will conduct research that accounts for the full gamut of coping options available to abused subordinates, pits theoretical perspectives against one another by simultaneously modeling multiple mechanisms, and accounts for a broader portfolio of leader behavior in studies of supervisory abuse.

ANTECEDENTS OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION

We turn our attention to research that explores the antecedent conditions associated with abusive supervision. The antecedents of abusive supervision deserve special attention and analysis because

it is from such research that we are likely to derive insights that can inform the work of practitioners who aim to eliminate or manage the effects of supervisory abuse. As we explained at the outset, interest in the antecedents of abusive supervision has grown over the past 10 years and in just the past 5 years almost 50 such articles have been published. Rather than offering an exhaustive review of this literature, we offer a synthesis of what scholars have learned. Our examination suggests that the antecedent variables that have been linked with abusive supervision operate through three sets of mechanisms: social learning, identity threat, and self-regulation impairment.

Social Learning

One explanation for why supervisors engage in abusive behavior is that they come to believe, through social learning processes, that it is acceptable and rewarding. According to social learning theory (Bandura 1973), individuals learn which behaviors and attitudes are considered appropriate in various contexts partly through observing their environment. Role models are an especially important feature of this process, as individuals determine which behaviors to emulate by looking to those who they perceive as being of high status and credible. Interestingly, research indicates that mimicry of role models' behavior can occur subconsciously (Cheng & Chartrand 2003), implying that abusive behavior may be adopted unintentionally. Several studies have used a social learning perspective to identify and explain antecedents of abusive supervision. Given the basic tenets of social learning theory, it is perhaps not surprising that these studies have tended to focus on socio-contextual factors such as the identification of likely role models (e.g., upper management behavior, family) and relevant organizational characteristics (e.g., norms, climate). We review key findings from these studies.

Workplace role models. Because supervisors occupy positions of authority and can influence important aspects of employees' careers and lives, their direct reports are likely to attend to them and perceive them as credible and powerful (Bandura 1973, Brown et al. 2005). Thus, employees are prone to emulating their supervisors' behavior, making abusive supervisors prime candidates for spreading aggressive behavior in organizations. Consistent with these arguments, researchers have proposed that abuse trickles down from higher to lower hierarchical levels, and empirical evidence has generally supported this assertion (e.g., Liu et al. 2012, Mawritz et al. 2012). Interestingly, Liu et al. (2012) found that the extent to which mid-level managers mimicked the abusive behavior of upper-level managers depended on their perceptions of upper-level management's intentions for the abuse. Abusive behavior that was perceived to be enacted by upper-level management to promote performance strengthened the trickle-down effect, whereas abusive behavior that was designed to cause injury or harm was less likely to be emulated by mid-level managers. In accordance with the tenets of social learning theory, these findings suggest that behavior is more likely to be mirrored when it is believed to generate favorable outcomes (Bandura 1986).

Familial role models. Long before employees enter the workforce, they gain an understanding of the acceptability of various beliefs and behaviors from those who played a role in their upbringing. Because children typically view their parents as authority figures and depend on them to meet many of their physical and psychological needs, parents are especially likely to serve as role models (Bandura 1973). Behavioral tendencies learned during childhood are often deeply rooted, readily manifesting themselves in the workplace during adulthood. Thus, children who learn from their parents that aggressive behavior is acceptable may develop hostile tendencies that carry over into the workplace later in life (Kiewitz et al. 2012). Indeed, empirical findings have shown a positive association between abusive supervisory behavior and factors such as family undermining

experienced during childhood and a history of parental aggression toward one another during the supervisor's childhood (Garcia et al. 2014, Kiewitz et al. 2012).

Children who grow up in households where aggression is prevalent are not always prone to aggressive behavior themselves. It is therefore not surprising that studies have also sought to examine the conditions under which exposure to such behavior during childhood translates into abusive supervision during adulthood. Garcia et al. (2014) found that angry rumination—a dispositional tendency to focus on negative interpretations of oneself or one's life—intensifies the link between history of family aggression and abusive supervision via its influence on hostile affect. Using a self-regulatory perspective, Kiewitz et al. (2012) showed the effects of family undermining on abusive supervision to be stronger for supervisors possessing lower levels of trait self-control. These findings suggest that traits related to emotion regulation have the potential to influence whether exposure to aggression in childhood leads to abusive supervision later in life.

Organizational norms. Beyond specific role models, broader socio-contextual influences may also lead employees to perceive aggressive behavior to be acceptable, thereby increasing the likelihood of its adoption by supervisors and other employees (Restubog et al. 2011). Indeed, recent research suggests that both aggressive organizational norms and hostile organizational climates are antecedents to abusive supervision (Mawritz et al. 2014a, Restubog et al. 2011), and the results of a recent meta-analysis (Zhang & Bednall 2016) revealed a positive correlation between aggressive norms and abusive supervision and a negative correlation between organizational sanctions against aggression and abusive supervision. Overall, these findings provide evidence that broader contextual factors in an organization can substantially influence abusive supervision.

Interestingly, consistent with the findings on parental role models and abusive supervision, research suggests that some supervisors are more prone than others to abusing subordinates when the organizational climate is hostile. In particular, supervisors' conscientiousness seems to buffer the extent to which a hostile organizational climate leads to abusive supervisory behavior (Mawritz et al. 2014a). This finding implies that one way to counteract the proliferation of abusive supervision in organizations may be to select more conscientious individuals for supervisory roles.

Country culture. Our review of the literature suggests that the topic of abusive supervision has piqued the interest of scholars from all over the world. But the global interest in abusive supervision has produced little cross-cultural research—studies of multiple countries simultaneously. Consequently, although it seems likely that the acceptability of abusive supervision varies across geographical regions, there is little original data that can shed light on cross-country differences. One exception is Vogel et al.'s (2015) examination of abusive supervision in Anglo versus Confucian country clusters. This research was not designed to predict abusive supervision, but the results suggest that there are normative differences in the acceptability of supervisor hostility across geographical regions. Vogel et al. found that the negative effects of abusive supervision on subordinates' interpersonal justice perceptions were stronger in Anglo countries than in Confucian countries and that power distance—the cultural acceptability of power differences across hierarchical levels in institutions—explained this effect. Vogel et al. theorized that in Confucian countries, which are characterized by higher power distance than Anglo countries, blanket acceptance of supervisor behavior, even if it is hostile, is culturally embedded. Additional evidence that there are normative differences in the cultural acceptability of abusive supervision comes from Mackey et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis suggesting that abusive supervision occurs more frequently in Asian countries than in the United States.

Identity Threat

Several published papers have as an organizing theme the notion that supervisors may be more likely to abuse direct reports when they experience threats to their identity as a leader, their sense of power or control, or their competence to effectively fulfill their responsibilities. Tedeschi & Felson's (1994) social interactionist theory of aggression posits that when circumstances prevent individuals from experiencing a desired self- or social-identity they may perceive hostile behavior as a useful reparative strategy. This may be particularly true for individuals with supervisory responsibilities. Evidence suggests that holding a position of power tends to increase reactivity to competence threats presumably because with such positions also comes the belief that one ought to be competent (Fast & Chen 2009). That reactivity can take the form of abusive supervision. As individuals climb the corporate ladder into managerial roles, the pressure to prove that they are worthy of such positions may make supervisory personnel especially sensitive to competence threats and prone to acts of defensive aggression. Studies of abusive supervision have identified threats supervisors experience that come from subordinates' behaviors and characteristics (i.e., threats from below), the actions and decision making of higher-level authorities (i.e., threats from above), and from their own inclination to experience identity threats (i.e., threats from within).

Identity threats from below: Subordinate provocation. Evidence suggests that abusive supervision may be a reaction to provocative subordinate behavior and/or individual characteristics. Because supervisor performance is often contingent to some degree on subordinates' behavior, one source of identity threat for supervisors is direct reports who through poor job performance or counternormative behavior interfere with supervisors' goal accomplishment and compromise their authority. That low performance and counternormative behavior constitute identity threats that evoke supervisory abuse is consistent with two theoretical perspectives: victim precipitation theory and moral exclusion theory.

According to victim precipitation theory, individuals are prone to becoming targets of aggression when they appear vulnerable and unable to retaliate or defend themselves (i.e., submissive victims) or when they violate norms and are unlikable, aggravating, and display behavior in need of correcting (i.e., provocative victims; Elias 1986, Olweus 1978). Subordinates fit the provocative victim profile and become ripe targets for supervisory abuse when their performance falls short of standards or when they execute behaviors that undermine organization functioning. Moral exclusion theory posits that individuals develop a psychological boundary or "scope of justice" that separates individuals for whom moral rules apply from those whose behavior or characteristics render them undeserving of just treatment (Opatow 1995). One factor that influences where targets reside with respect to the scope of justice is their perceived utility. Unlike individuals who lack utility, individuals who appear useful will fall within the scope of justice and be perceived as deserving of morally appropriate treatment (Hafer & Olson 2003). Accordingly, subordinates who are excluded from the supervisors' scope of justice are potentially vulnerable to mistreatment such as abusive supervision. Consistent with the concepts and processes described in the victim precipitation and moral exclusion theories, several studies have found that lower-performing subordinates are more prone to becoming targets of abusive supervision (Liang et al. 2016, Tepper et al. 2011, Wang et al. 2015), as are subordinates who perform acts of deviance directed at the organization and supervisor and those who avoid their supervisors (Lian et al. 2014, Simon et al. 2015).

Another relevant theoretical perspective is the multi-motive model of reactions to interpersonal threat, which posits that negative interpersonal experiences undermine one's sense of relational value (i.e., the feeling that one is valued and accepted by others), which can in turn evoke anger

and aggression (Smart Richman & Leary 2009). Simon et al. (2015) argued that, for someone in a supervisory position, threatening negative interpersonal experiences may consist of being the target of subordinates' CWB or avoidance because these acts violate organizational norms dictating that superiors be treated with dignity and respect (Sy 2010). Such norm violations threaten supervisors' status and perceived control and can lead to aggressive acts that are designed to reclaim power. Other potentially counternormative behaviors, such as unfavorable reactions from subordinates to supervisors' attempts at charismatic behavior, have been conceptualized as provocations and threats to supervisors' self-esteem, which, too, may lead to negative affect and attempts to correct subordinates' behavior with abusive supervision (Pundt 2014). Recent work suggests that high-performing subordinates may become targets of abusive supervision because supervisors who are high in social dominance orientation—a belief in the efficacy of institutions that sustain status inequalities over those that are committed to cooperation and egalitarianism—will perceive high performers to be threats to an organization's hierarchical structure (Khan et al. 2016).

More enduring characteristics of subordinates, such as their similarity to supervisors and personality traits, have also been examined as predictors of abusive supervision, although these characteristics are often proposed to influence abusive supervision via more proximal mechanisms. Using a moral exclusion perspective, Tepper et al. (2011b) found that deep-level dissimilarity led to abusive supervision through supervisors' perceptions of relationship conflict and subordinates' poor performance, with relationship conflict mediating between deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision when supervisors perceived subordinates to be low performing. Similarly, on the basis of victim precipitation theory, Wang et al. (2015) argued and found evidence to suggest that individuals low in conscientiousness or high in neuroticism fit the provocative victim profile, in part, via low task performance. Also using victim precipitation theory and conceptualizing those low in conscientiousness and emotional stability as provocative victims, Henle & Gross (2014) found that subordinates' emotional stability and conscientiousness negatively predicted abusive supervision through subordinates' negative affect. Finally, subordinates' core self-evaluations have been found to be negatively related to abusive supervision in two studies (Neves 2014, Wu & Hu 2009). Neves (2014) conceptualized individuals with low core self-evaluations as well as individuals with low coworker support as submissive victims, and found that the effects of these variables on abusive supervision were exacerbated for organizations that underwent downsizing.

Identity threats from above: Displaced aggression. Supervisors also experience threats that come from hierarchically superior sources and, when this occurs, subordinates are prime targets for abusive behavior by supervisors because they are relatively safe targets (Hoobler & Hu 2013, Klaussner 2014, Tepper et al. 2006). This phenomenon—whereby supervisors express their frustrations against less powerful targets—is referred to as displaced aggression (Tedeschi & Norman 1985), and it explains why supervisors (who feel that they have been wronged by higher authorities) may choose to engage in abusive behavior toward their subordinates, rather than the true source of their distress. Much of the research using displaced aggression as an explanation for abusive supervision has focused on identifying supervisors' unfavorable situational factors or stressors that bring about abusive supervision. A justice perspective (Greenberg & Scott 1996, Skarlicki & Folger 1997) is often invoked in these studies, based on the premise that supervisors' organizational injustice threatens their sense of dignity and respect, leading to negative affective responses that may be alleviated through the restoration of equity (e.g., by enacting aggressive behavior).

Common to studies of identity threats from above is examination of moderator variables that influence the effects of supervisors' negative experiences on abusive supervision. As examples, Aryee et al. (2007) found that authoritarian leadership style exacerbated the relationship between supervisors' interactional injustice and abusive supervision, and Hoobler & Brass (2006) found

that supervisor hostile attribution bias exacerbated the psychological contract violation–abusive supervision relationship. Findings such as these are consistent with the notion that people differ with respect to their beliefs and needs regarding power and status and are differentially sensitive to threats in these domains (Barrick et al. 2013). Although negative experiences trickle down from supervisors to employees, abusive supervision is by no means an inevitable response of supervisors who experience unfavorable circumstances at work.

Identity threats from within: Supervisor characteristics. A small body of literature has focused on identifying power and identity-related supervisor characteristics that evoke abuse. A strong individual identity—in which a person is preoccupied with the way in which he or she is different from others—has been linked to both higher average levels of and variability in abusive supervision (Johnson et al. 2012). People who possess a strong individual identity are motivated by self-interest and opportunities to demonstrate their superiority over others (Cross et al. 2011). Johnson and colleagues reasoned that individual-oriented supervisors might engage in abusive behavior to enhance power distance and differentiate themselves from followers.

Certain personality traits, such as the dark triad, are also indicative of self-interest and a high need for power and control (Christie & Geis 1970). For example, supervisors' psychological entitlement—a persistent sense that one is entitled to and deserves more than others (Campbell et al. 2013)—has been linked to increased abusive supervision (Whitman et al. 2013). It has also been argued that trait Machiavellianism makes aggressive thoughts more accessible and thus facilitates hostile behavior (Kiazad et al. 2010). Consistent with these ideas, Kiazad et al. found that authoritarian leadership style, which “asserts absolute authority and control over subordinates and demands unquestionable obedience” (Cheng et al. 2004, p. 91), mediated the relationship between Machiavellianism and abusive supervision. This relationship was moderated by subordinates' organization-based self-esteem; employees with lower organization-based self-esteem were more likely to perceive higher levels of authoritarian leadership as abusive, presumably because they are more prone to looking for validation externally. Interestingly, although meta-analyses reveal a positive, significant relationship between authoritarian leadership style and abusive supervision, the meta-analytic effects are nonsignificant for Machiavellianism and supervisor power (Zhang & Bednall 2016), suggesting more research on the effects of these variables is needed to fully understand how and when they impact abusive supervision.

Self-Regulation Impairment

The third explanation for supervisors' abusive behavior involves self-regulation impairment. People prefer consistency between what they do (i.e., behavior) and what they hope to accomplish (i.e., goals; Swann 2012). Theories of self-regulation are concerned with explaining how people manage thoughts, emotions, and impulses in ways that produce behavior-goal consistency (Baumeister et al. 1998, Schmeichel & Baumeister 2004). When self-regulatory processes are working properly, people are able to identify performance standards, monitor the effects of their behavior to detect departures from those standards, and modify their behavior to correct deviations (Carver 1979, Carver & Scheier 1982). Performing these regulatory functions requires and consumes self-resources such as mental energy, personal willpower, and social support. People at work routinely experience demands that require and consume self-resources. Examples include solving complex problems, focusing attention, dealing with interruptions, and managing one's emotions (Baumeister et al. 2007). Ego depletion theory (also referred to as the strength model of self-control; Baumeister et al. 1998, Muraven & Baumeister 2000) posits that repeated efforts to self-regulate can cause individuals to experience self-regulation impairment, a state of

exhaustion with respect to the finite pool of psychological resources that individuals draw upon to perform regulatory functions. Eroded or compromised regulatory abilities can, in turn, lead to regulatory failure, which is evidenced in self-destructive behaviors ranging from self-medication, to procrastination, to aggression (Baumeister 1997).

In several studies, scholars have invoked ego depletion theory to explain why individuals in supervisory positions abuse their direct reports. Some scholars have grounded studies of abusive supervision in other theories that conceptualize the management of psychological resources and resource deficits as central to explaining why people do what they do [e.g., Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory and Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory of stress]. Although empirical tests of these ideas are not always explicitly grounded in the theory of ego depletion, we see similarities that justify treating them together under a broader umbrella of self-regulation impairment.

In applying the concept of self-regulation impairment to understanding abusive supervision, it is typically argued that the complexity inherent in supervisory roles, which can involve balancing multiple competing demands, performing high-level decision making, implementing strategic change, and handling difficult client interactions, arouses negative emotions and requires substantial use of managers' mental resources (Collins & Jackson 2015, Wang et al. 2010, Yam et al. 2016). As these resources become drained and/or as negative emotions intensify, the ability to self-regulate is impaired. Accordingly, suppressing impulses to act counter-normatively toward subordinates—for example, holding back the urge to belittle a poorly performing employee instead of offering constructive criticism—becomes more difficult, as the immediate hedonic rewards of abusive supervisory behavior start to outweigh any long-term, potentially detrimental consequences of such behavior for the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

Consistent with predictions that derive from theories of self-regulation impairment, evidence suggests that supervisors are more abusive when they experience time-based work stress and refrain from physical exercise (Burton et al. 2012), have exceedingly difficult work goals (Mawritz et al. 2014b), work on more difficult tasks (Collins & Jackson 2015), and perform more acts that drain self-resources such as behaving ethically (Lin et al. 2016) and displaying emotions that may not be consistent with felt emotions [i.e., surface acting (Yam et al. 2016)]. Support for the self-regulation impairment explanation for abusive supervision also comes from studies linking supervisory hostility with presumed indicators of resource depletion such as psychological distress (Byrne et al. 2014, Li et al. 2016) and supervisor traits that capture the dispositional ability to manage and efficiently deploy self-resources. Studies that fall into the latter category suggest that supervisors are more abusive when they are lower in emotional intelligence (Zhang & Bednall 2016) and higher in psychological entitlement and less politically skilled (Whitman et al. 2013), and that the effects of depleting workplace factors are weaker when supervisors are higher in trait self-control (Pundt 2014, Yam et al. 2016) and higher in mindfulness (Liang et al. 2016).

Although most studies of the antecedents of abusive supervision have focused on dispositional or work-based factors, there is growing interest in understanding how circumstances outside of the workplace influence abusive supervision via self-regulatory processes. In one study, for example, sleep quality (but not quantity) emerged as a predictor of daily abusive supervisory behavior, and this effect was mediated by ego depletion (Barnes et al. 2015). Family-to-work conflict has also been found to predict abusive supervision via its effects on ego depletion, although this mediated effect was stronger for female supervisors (presumably because females tend to allocate more time toward the family role when roles conflict) and for supervisors with higher control over their work situations (because these individuals perceive fewer constraints on their transgressive behavior; Courtright et al. 2016). Also relevant to this discussion is Kiewitz et al.'s (2012) finding

that the positive effect of family undermining on abusive supervisory behavior was stronger for supervisors who were lower in self-control. In sum, although there is a dearth of research on non-work influences on abusive supervision and future research in this area is very much needed, the results of these three studies suggest that what happens off the job can play an important role in self-regulatory processes that occur at work and that gender, control over one's work situation, and dispositional self-control can influence the extent to which stressful home or family situations translate into abusive supervisory behavior in the workplace.

Because a good deal of supervisors' time is spent managing employees, it stands to reason that employees who are difficult to deal with or who perform poorly are more likely to deplete managers' psychological resources and thus undermine the ability of managers to self-regulate. Tepper & Simon (2015) have argued that high-maintenance employees—defined as employees who are perceived by managers to require substantial amounts of tangible and intangible resources to satisfactorily contribute to organizational functioning—could deplete managers' self-regulatory resources and lead to abusive supervision. They also proposed several behavioral risk factors that are likely to lead managers to perceive an employee as high maintenance, such as extreme performance deviations, CWB, neediness, dependence, self-interest, and passivity. Indirect support for these ideas comes from meta-analytic evidence suggesting that “high-maintenance” employee characteristics such as negative affectivity and narcissism are positively related to abusive supervision, whereas employee traits that could be considered “low maintenance” (i.e., conscientiousness and agreeableness) correlated negatively with abusive supervision (Zhang & Bednall 2016).

Integration

We proposed that three core mechanisms—social learning, identity threat, and self-regulatory impairment—explain why supervisors abuse subordinates. We acknowledge that classifying the drivers of abusive supervision within three overarching theoretical mechanisms may, at first blush, seem overly parsimonious. We contend, however, that many of the theories and concepts that have been used to explain abusive supervision can be subsumed by one of these mechanisms. It is also apparent that the three mechanisms are not entirely independent of one another and that more than one can be used to inform many of the observed effects of abusive supervision antecedents. It is therefore useful to reflect on the interplay among the three core mechanisms. As shown in **Figure 4**, social learning, identity threat, and self-regulatory mechanisms all directly impact abusive supervision. However, social learning, as a more distal mechanism, should also influence the identity threat and self-regulation impairment mechanisms. In particular, social learning processes may influence the extent to which individuals come to value opportunities to assume the leadership role and what they perceive as threatening. In influencing beliefs about the appropriateness of abusive supervision, social learning should also influence the extent to which supervisors attempt to self-regulate to overcome their impulses to engage in abuse. Self-regulatory impairment is also likely to be directly impacted by identity threat, as supervisors who feel threatened in some way are apt to experience exhaustion of self-resources. Finally, self-regulatory processes should impact identity threat because, as reserves of psychological resources are drained and individuals strive to protect those resources that remain, they may become increasingly sensitive to threats in their environment. In summary, although the relationships depicted in **Figure 4** do not exhaust all possibilities regarding how the three antecedent mechanisms influence one another, we believe that they offer a solid and parsimonious starting point for understanding how the core drivers of abusive supervision inter-relate.

Before closing this section on abusive supervision antecedents, we highlight what we believe to be a promising but largely overlooked research agenda. We have discussed several studies of

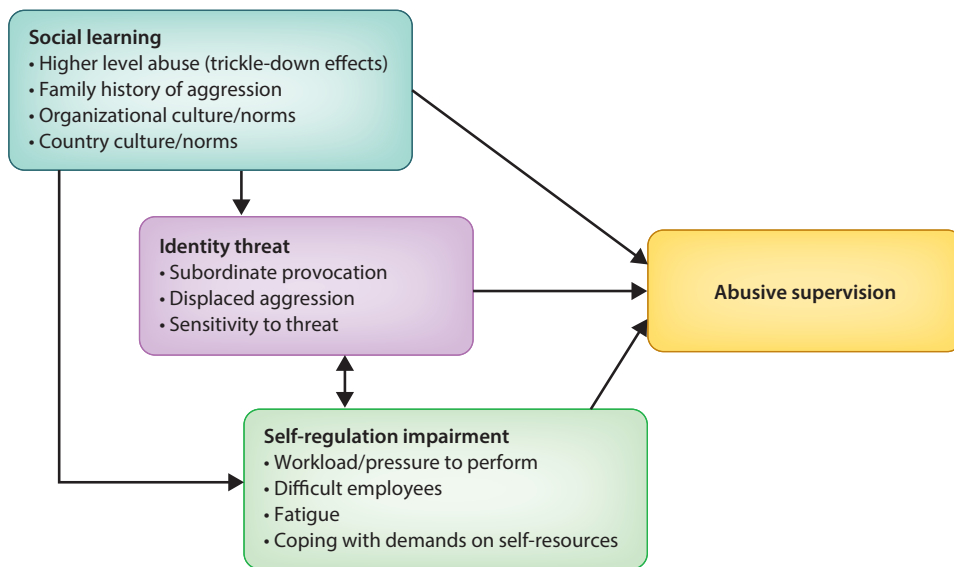


Figure 4

Integrative model of the mechanisms leading to abusive supervision.

supervisor dispositional factors that operate through three mechanisms—social learning, identity threat, and self-regulation impairment—either directly or as moderators of other predictors. We recognize value in continued examination of trait predictors of abusive supervision. This would include theory-based study of traits that have been treated as controls in prior abusive supervision research (e.g., negative affectivity and trait anxiety; Barnes et al. 2015, Collins & Jackson 2015, Eissa & Lester 2016, Lin et al. 2016, Yam et al. 2016), as well as traits that have not been modeled in abusive supervision research but that have been linked with one or more of the three mechanisms (e.g., neuroticism; Kammeyer-Mueller et al. 2016).

The fresher research terrain involves a focus on leadership competencies. We have pointed out that little research has examined abusive supervision within larger models of leadership behavior. As a result, it is not clear how abusive supervision relates to the performance of productive leader behaviors such as articulating an inspiring vision, using persuasive arguments, or making personal appeals (Yukl et al. 1996). Tepper et al. (2011a) argue that individuals in leadership positions will use abusive acts for instrumental reasons. However, given the costs that come with abusive supervision, it seems likely that supervisors would want to avoid using abuse to get things done if they have better options. Yet not everyone who occupies leadership positions will have the ability to use more functional forms of leadership. This notion is illustrated in the research stream that is dedicated to understanding the concept of political skill, which Ferris et al. (2005) define as, “the ability to understand others at work and to use that knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal or organizational objectives” (p. 7). We would expect that politically skilled supervisors—those who are astute observers of social interaction, have a flexible and subtle influence style, have the ability to develop rich social networks, and come across as sincere and trustworthy—will not have to resort to abusive supervision because they will have better leadership options that they can deploy. In the only relevant study of which we are aware, Whitman et al. (2013) found that politically skilled supervisors were less likely to use behaviors from the abusive supervision repertoire. Studies of this sort illustrate how scholars can complement

existing abusive supervision research by accounting for the role that leader (in)competence plays in explaining when supervisors are more or less likely to execute abusive acts.

CONCLUSION

We have offered an assessment of the state of abusive supervision research, highlighted areas of concern with respect to the research questions being asked as well as scholars' approaches to answering those questions, and have offered guidance to scholars as we think about where we go from here. There are many reasons to be sanguine about the future of abusive supervision research. Interest in the construct, as indicated by the number of publications in recent years, has never been higher. The challenge, as we see it, is to channel that interest to productive ends. We recognize that in several important respects, our opinion about how scholars should channel their energy differs from what others have recommended. It is our hope that the perspective offered here will inspire scholars to pursue research on abusive supervision that is both intellectually stimulating and of practical value.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. Publishing on the topic of abusive supervision has steadily increased since 2001. Between 2011 and 2015, more than 150 papers were published that reported results from studies of the relationships between abusive supervision and its presumed antecedents and consequences.
2. The empirical evidence pertaining to the consequences of abusive supervision belies anecdotal observations (as well as the speculation of some scholars) suggesting that downward hostility can be useful; the preponderance of work to date suggests that abusive supervision undermines individual, unit, and organizational functioning.
3. Studies pertaining to abused subordinates' coping fall into distinguishable categories: studies that differentiate abused subordinates based on how effectively they cope, studies that examine how they cope, and studies that examine the efficacy of abused subordinates' coping strategies.
4. Studies of the consequences of abusive supervision have been grounded in a variety of theoretical perspectives including displaced aggression, social learning, social exchange, need satisfaction, ego depletion, and affective events, among others.
5. The antecedent factors leading to abusive supervision operate through three processes: social learning, identity threat, and self-regulation impairment.
6. Individuals come to understand the "acceptability" of abusive supervision through exposure to role models at work, family upbringing, organizational norms, and country culture.
7. The threats to identity that produce abusive supervision come from subordinate provocation, mistreatment by higher authorities, and personal sensitivity to threat.
8. The self-regulation impairment that produces abusive supervision comes from time-based work stress, exceedingly difficult goals, displaying emotions that are inconsistent with felt emotions, behaving ethically, poor sleep quality, and conflict between work and family.

FUTURE ISSUES

1. Under what conditions is the abusive supervision repertoire associated with the perception that leaders are abusive and, with respect to outcomes that have been linked with the repertoire in prior research, does endorsing the supervisor abuse label matter?
2. In future research, scholars can make contributions to the literature by operationalizing abusive supervision using supervisor self-reports, including objective measures of productivity, withdrawal, and well-being, and using experimental designs.
3. What coping strategies do abused subordinates prefer and how effective are these strategies?
4. What is the relative importance of the various mechanisms linking abusive supervision to outcomes? With respect to the relationship between abusive supervision and productivity, is there validity to a positive pathway (captured by such things as attention, fear of negative evaluation, and a desire to prove the supervisor wrong), and how does this pathway's explanatory power stack up against the negative pathway (captured by ego depletion, negative reciprocity, compromised team dynamics, and negative role modeling)?
5. What incremental role does abusive supervision play in explaining outcome variables above and beyond the effects of traditionally studied leader behaviors? Does abusive supervision influence how subordinates respond to these leader behaviors? How does coworker-directed leadership influence the behavioral, affective, and cognitive responses of abused subordinates?
6. What is the relative importance of and inter-relationships among the mechanisms leading to abusive supervision? What role does leadership competence play in explaining when supervisors behave abusively?
7. How do the processes pertaining to abusive supervision generalize across cultures?

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Errata

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