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## Righting a wrong: Retaliation on a voodoo doll symbolizing an abusive supervisor restores justice<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

When a subordinate receives abusive treatment from a supervisor, a natural response is to retaliate against the supervisor. Although retaliation is dysfunctional and should be discouraged, we examine the potential functional role retaliation plays in terms of alleviating the negative consequences of abusive supervision on subordinate justice perceptions. Based on the notion that retaliation following mistreatment can restore justice for victims, we propose a model whereby retaliation following abusive supervision alleviates the negative effect of abusive supervision on subordinate justice perceptions. In two experimental studies (Study 1 and 2), whereby we manipulated abusive supervision and subordinate symbolic retaliation—in particular, harming a voodoo doll that represents the abusive supervisor—we found general support for our predictions. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

## Introduction

When a subordinate is subjected to abusive supervision such as public ridicule, yelling, scapegoating, or other forms of supervisor mistreatment, a natural response for the subordinate is to directly retaliate against the abusive supervisor (Bies & Tripp, 1996). Indeed, a growing body of studies (e.g., Lian, Brown, Ferris, Liang, Keeping, & Morrison, 2014; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007) and meta-analyses (Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Schyns & Schilling, 2013) suggests that a relationship exists between abusive supervision and subsequent subordinate retaliation. Unfortunately, retaliation—or actions “in response to some perceived harm or wrongdoing by another party that is intended to inflict damage” (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001, p. 53)—would seem to have destructive consequences for all parties involved. For instance, retaliation is detrimental to supervisor-subordinate relationships, such that it can escalate conflict, resulting in further acts of supervisory abuse (Aquino et al., 2001; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Tepper et al., 2009). Moreover, retaliation can result in expensive lawsuits (Perry, 2000) as well as undermine employee job performance

(Robinson & Greenberg, 1998). Given these negative effects, various researchers have argued that retaliation should be avoided (e.g., Folger & Baron, 1996; Lian, Brown, et al., 2014).

Yet, despite these negative consequences, retaliation appears to be relatively common. For example, surveys have shown that 76% of employees reported engaging in aggression towards their supervisor over the past year (Greenberg & Barling, 1999), and that employees aggress towards their supervisor as much as they do towards other coworkers, perhaps more so (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999). The prevalence of retaliation suggests that retaliation may play a functional role in dealing with abuse—a perspective largely overlooked in the abusive supervision literature (for an exception, see Tepper, Mitchell, Haggard, Kwan, & Park, 2015). In fact, numerous perspectives that support the notion argue retaliation exists as a phenomenon precisely because it can be adaptive. For example, a social functionalist perspective of behavior would argue that retaliation exists because it serves an adaptive response (Keltner & Gross, 1999); a rational actor perspective would argue that retaliation occurs because actors conclude it serves a purpose (Vroom, 1964); and a social exchange perspective

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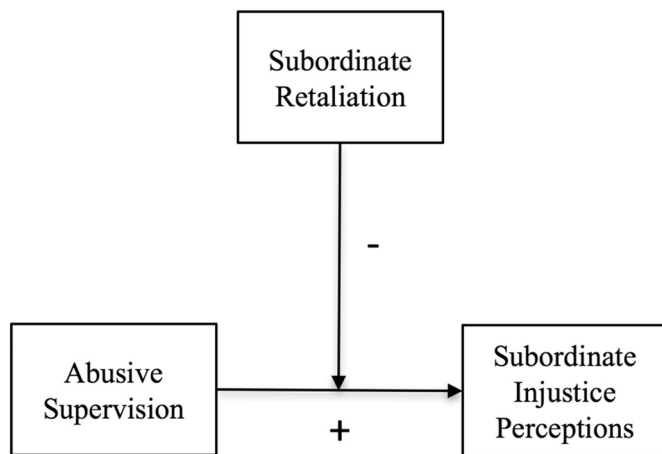


Fig. 1. Heuristic model.

would argue that retaliation occurs, because it helps restore balance in a relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Nevertheless, empirical evidence demonstrating the adaptive or functional nature of retaliation for the retaliator is scant.

Drawing inspiration from these perspectives—as well as frameworks which regard abusive supervision as undermining justice perceptions (Tepper, 2000) and retaliation as a reaction to injustice (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997)—we propose a functional theory of retaliation whereby engaging in retaliation reaffirms one's sense of justice (see Fig. 1). In this framework, abusive supervision acts as an external stressor (Liang, Hanig, Evans, Brown, & Lian, in press; Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011) that violates people's expectations for fair treatment (e.g., Adams, 1965; Lerner, 1980).

In presenting our functional theory of retaliation, our work makes several important contributions to the literature. First, our work contributes to both the literature on justice frameworks of the consequences of abusive supervision, as well as the literature on retaliation in the workplace. Though it has been posited that abusive supervision is unfair (Tepper, 2000), and that retaliation in response to being wronged can serve as a means for individuals to restore justice (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 1998; Bies & Tripp, 2002; Greenberg, 1990; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Tepper et al., 2009), prior abusive supervision research has typically only considered subordinate retaliation as an outcome of abusive supervision (for an exception, see Tepper et al., 2015). In the current research, we directly test retaliation as a means of restoring justice rather than simply as a response to perceived injustice, by considering the interactive effect of abusive supervision and retaliation on perceptions of justice.

Second, our work contributes to the retributive justice literature by examining the beneficial effects of retaliation on victim outcomes. The dominant perspective of the retaliation literature is that retaliation is principally destructive, and therefore places victims of mistreatment who retaliate in the wrong. However, our work adopts the perspective of the victim and puts forth a functional view that retaliation buffers the detrimental impact of abusive supervision by directly restoring the justice perceptions of victims. As such, our research “gives back” (Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009) to the retributive justice literature in which it is grounded and enriches the literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of the outcomes of retaliation.

Third, our work extends social exchange frameworks of retaliatory responses to abusive supervision (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). In particular, prior social exchange research has primarily focused on how supervisor behaviors lead to subordinate outcomes—presenting what is essentially a stimulus-response perspective of social exchange, whereby subordinate outcomes are determined by supervisor inputs (as noted by Tepper et al., 2015). In contrast, our paper adopts a relational perspective (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004),

whereby subordinates actively engage in actions affecting the overall exchange, with such actions also impacting subordinates' own outcomes (in particular, their sense of justice). In so doing, we respond to the call of Tepper et al. (2015) to consider both sides of the exchange relationship when examining social exchange outcomes.

Finally, our work contributes to the abusive supervision literature and the leadership literature in general. Much of the research on leadership styles and outcomes is premised almost entirely upon cross-sectional field studies, assuming that leadership style *causes* subordinate outcomes without any concrete evidence. Cross-sectional designs are not only limited in drawing conclusions (Fischer, Dietz, & Antonakis, 2017), but are also susceptible to potential endogeneity threats (Antonakis, 2017); thus, the interpretation of those findings is limited. Our work addresses those issues in the literature by advancing well-designed experimental paradigms; in so doing, we respond to the call for leadership scholars to go beyond the “cross-sectional snapshots” with more creative experimental designs in leadership research (Antonakis, 2017, p. 12; Brown & Lord, 1999).

### Justice frameworks of abusive supervision

People care about justice and have a fundamental need to believe that we live in a world that is a fair and orderly place where individuals get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). The concern for justice is universal and serves the evolutionary function of promoting long-term cooperation, which is critical to the survival of the human species (Brosnan & de Waal, 2003). Justice is also hedonically valued by human beings, as evidenced by functional magnetic resonance imaging studies showing that people's brain regions associated with reward processes are activated when receiving fair rather than unfair monetary offers (Tabibnia, Satpute, & Lieberman, 2008).

This fundamental concern for justice is central to early theories of distributive and procedural justice (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), which suggest that people care about the fair allocation of resources and the use of fair procedures, because these outcomes serve instrumental purposes (Tyler, 1987). When fair reward distributions and procedures are in place, people believe that they will be rewarded and punished proportionately to their actions; as a result, people are encouraged to work hard towards their goals and refrain from harming others (Hafer, 2000; Hafer, Bègue, Choma, & Dempsey, 2005). In addition to instrumental reasons, people also care about justice because it communicates relational information; in particular, being treated fairly carries implications about people's social standing in their group (Lind & Tyler, 1992). People infer their social standing in a group from the treatment they receive: fair treatment conveys positive social identity-relevant information for individuals and signifies that they are valued members of the group (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Blader, 2003). On the other hand, being treated without dignity and respect is perceived to not only hurt a victim's standing within the group (Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; Tyler & Lind, 1992), but also damage the victim's self-worth (Ferris, Spence, Brown, & Heller, 2012; Tepper, 2000). All of the above suggests that concern for justice is a powerful motivational force that drives behaviors (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001), and that people are motivated to see justice prevail and be reaffirmed in their belief that people get what they deserve (Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005).

Drawing on the central role justice plays in our everyday lives, abusive supervision research has used justice frameworks to explain the detrimental effects of being abused (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision represents supervisory behaviors that are non-physical in nature but nonetheless convey a sense of hostility towards subordinates. Such behaviors typically include ridiculing and humiliating subordinates in public, refusing to speak with subordinates, or otherwise debasing subordinates (Tepper, 2000). Extensive research, albeit cross-sectional in nature, has established relationships between abusive supervisory behaviors and subordinates' diminished justice perceptions (Aryee,

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