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Abuse for status: A social dominance perspective of abusive supervision.☆,☆☆

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ABSTRACT

Abusive supervision in the workplace is an important issue because it is detrimental to organizations and their performance. However, little is known about antecedents of supervisors' abusive behavior. To better understand the antecedents of abusive supervision, we develop a model that illustrates why, how and when supervisors display sustained abusive behavior toward their subordinates. Focusing on status, we propose that a motivation for status enhancement mediates the relationship between supervisors' status-related dispositional traits (their social dominance orientation) and their abusive behavior. We also propose that this mediated relationship is stronger when supervisors experience positional instability, when they perceive low internal respect, and when their organizations have a mechanistic structure or a hostile climate. Overall, our conceptual model sheds new light on the proactive motivation for abusive supervision.

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1. Introduction

> *Miranda is a boss from hell. Capricious demands, impossible tasks, ridicule, scorn, arrogance and humiliation … this behavior is driving her subordinates crazy. However, Miranda enjoys an extremely high status. Each morning before she arrives at the office, her subordinates are in a flurry to complete each detail to avoid displeasing her. Everyone fears and respects her.*

These words describe a scenario from the film *The Devil Wears Prada*. Miranda's behavior is a good example of abusive supervision, which has been defined as "leaders' engagement in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000: 178). Abusive supervision is associated with negative outcomes such as psychological distress (Tepper, 2000), aggression directed at the victim's supervisors or coworkers (Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013; Tepper, 2007), the undermining of family relationships (Hoobler & Brass, 2006) or decreased team creativity (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012).

Compared to the abundant research on the consequences of abusive supervision, few studies have investigated the antecedents of such abuse (Mawritz, Dust, & Resick, 2014; Mawritz, Folger, & Latham, 2014). Prior research has suggested that supervisors abuse their subordinates because they themselves receive mistreatment from their employers (Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005), because they emulate their leaders' abusive behavior (Liu et al., 2012), or because they experience high levels of stress (Mawritz, Dust et al., 2014; Mawritz, Folger et al., 2014). These findings enrich our understanding of why

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abusive supervision occurs, but they do not explain why supervisors would engage in abusive behavior in a *sustained* way. As the sustained nature of the behavior is key to the definition of abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), those who engage in such behavior must have some motivating reward for their persistence in the practice (Salin, 2003b). Exploring this motivation should help us to understand the fundamental cause of abusive supervision. In addition, subordinates actively seek indications from their supervisors' behavior as a guide for their own work-related attitudes and actions (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). When supervisory behavior is continuously destructive, such behavior may elicit negative job attitudes among the subordinates, thereby harming the organization's capacity to function. Hence, examining supervisors' proactive motivations for abusive behavior may provide a guide for taking countermeasures and mitigating the detrimental consequences of such abuse.

Despite its theoretical and practical importance, the proactive motivation for abusive supervision has not been clearly identified. The literature on strategic bullying suggests that people bully others to attain influence and status (Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007; Shao, Resick, & Hargis, 2011), as desire for status is a fundamental human motive (Anderson et al., 2015). These research findings indicate that status could be an essential element in the motivation for abusive supervision. Therefore, we focus on the factor of status to explain why supervisors display abusive behavior toward their subordinates. As abusive supervision may result from interactions among individuals or from other situational factors (Martinko et al., 2013), we also consider contextual factors that may facilitate a supervisor's motives for abuse.

Specifically, we propose that people with a high social dominance orientation (hereafter SDO) have a stronger motive to gain status, because status can help them attain dominance over others (Chen, Peterson, Phillips, & Podolny, 2012; Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; Duckitt, 2001; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). This status motive can then lead to abusive supervision, because abusive behavior conveys an authoritative image that influences the submissive targets (Shao et al., 2011; Tepper, Duffy, & Breaux-Soignet, 2012). The surrounding context may also affect whether a supervisor's high SDO manifests in abusive behavior. We propose that two kinds of threats, namely positional instability and perceived low internal respect (Ali Al-Atwi & Bakir, 2014; Williams, 2014), could exacerbate abusive behavior by supervisors with high SDO. Such threats may motivate them to abuse subordinates as a means of protecting their power. We also propose that a mechanistic organizational structure or a hostile climate (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Mawritz, Dust et al., 2014; Mawritz, Folger et al., 2014) can provide a facilitative environment that legitimizes and socially reinforces abusive behavior.

Thus, this study develops a comprehensive model of abusive supervision by exploring the status-enhancement motive as a mediating mechanism between SDO and abusive supervision. Positional instability, perceived low internal respect, a mechanistic organizational structure and a hostile climate are identified as contextual contingencies for the status motive mechanism. Fig. 1 presents a model of the proposed relationships.

Our study makes several contributions to the literature on abusive supervision. First, we identify a dispositional trait (SDO) and a motivational factor (status motive) as two crucial antecedents of abusive supervision. This focus on the factor of status helps to explain why supervisors might engage in abusive behavior in a *sustained* way, which is a question that has remained unanswered by previous studies. Second, our study addresses why and under what conditions abusive behavior serves to enhance status and defend power positions. This situational approach enriches the current research on the interactions between power and status as predictors of abusive behavior (Anicich, Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2013; Georgesen & Harris, 2006; Williams, 2014). Third, our study extends the social learning model of abusive supervision by examining the organizational situations in which supervisors

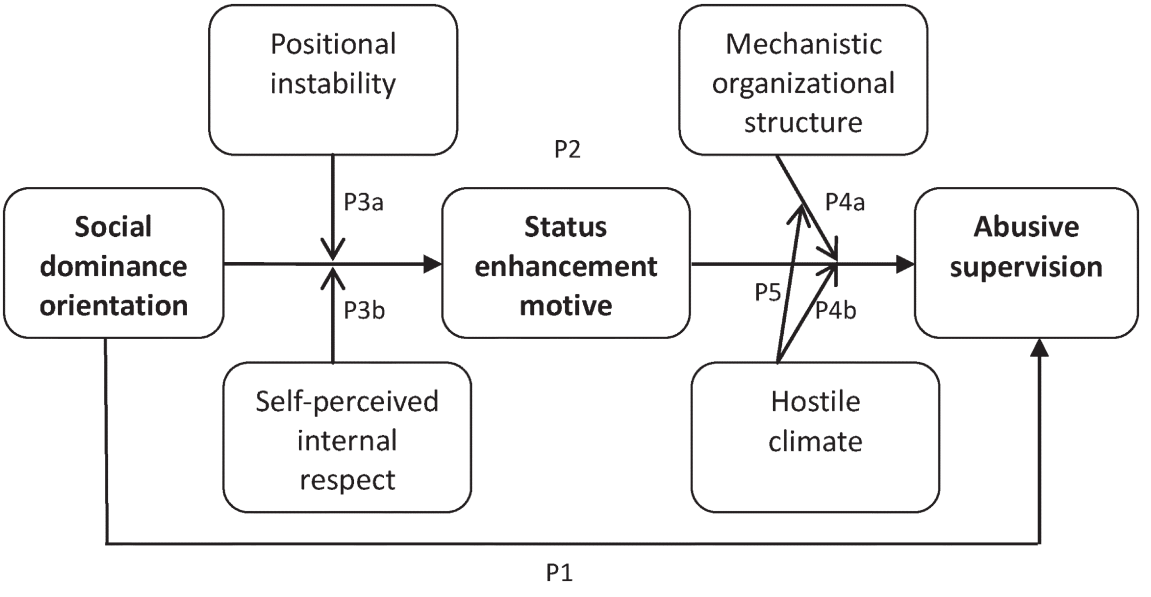

Fig. 1. Theoretical Model.

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