



Corporate psychopathy and abusive supervision: Their influence on employees' job satisfaction and turnover intentions

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ABSTRACT

Dark leaders have been characterized as abusive; they exhibit hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors and rudeness towards employees. Abusive leadership has also been shown to have negative impacts on employee and organizational performance. However, very few studies have examined the underlying factors of dark leadership. This study proposes to test the relationship between corporate psychopathy traits and abusive supervision, employees' job satisfaction and intention to quit their job. A total of 97 employees from a non-profit organization completed measures of their abusive supervision and corporate psychopathy traits as well as self-report measures of job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Corporate psychopathy was positively and significantly correlated with abusive supervision and turnover intentions and negatively correlated with employees' job satisfaction. SEM results indicate that, although the B-Scan 360 has a direct influence on turnover intentions, it influences job satisfaction through abusive supervision behavior. Our results indicate psychopathy may be an underlying factor explaining abusive supervision which is detrimental to employee attitudes.

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1. Introduction

Abusive supervision has been defined as “the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Tepper (2000) further explains that, like other types of abuse, abusive supervision is likely to continue until the target or the supervisor terminates the relationship or the supervisor changes his or her behaviors. As abusers rarely recognize their faults, the most likely outcome is the employee leaving his/her job; hence the popular adding “employees don't leave their organization, they leave their boss”. In a study of the consequences of abusive supervision, Tepper (2000) found that employees reporting higher rates of abusive supervision were less satisfied with their job, had lower levels of commitment to their organization and had higher turnover intentions. Most of the research has looked into the consequences of abusive supervisory behaviors and organizational-level factors related to abusive supervision but very few studies have looked into the abusive supervisor's personality traits that might be driving their abusive behavior.

Some researchers have presented evidence suggesting that psychopathy is associated with negative leadership style (Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014; Mathieu, Neumann, Babiak, & Hare, 2014; Westerlaken & Woods, 2013) as well as a negative impact on

employees (Mathieu & Babiak, 2015; Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, et al., 2014); clearly, more needs to be done to explore these relationships.

The goal of the present study is to test, using a structural equation model, the influence of employees' perception of supervisors' psychopathy traits on employees' rating of the supervisors' abusive supervision. Furthermore, the SEM model will test the influence of both employees' perception of supervisors' psychopathy traits and abusive supervision on employees' job satisfaction and turnover intentions.

1.1. Consequences of abusive supervision

Abusive supervision has been associated with lower job and life satisfaction, lower commitment to the organization, higher work-family conflict and overall psychological distress (Tepper, 2000). Furthermore, abusive supervision is associated with lower employee creativity (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012), an increase in employees' organizational deviance (Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008) and lowered employee performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007). The cost of abusive supervision to organizations (US based) was estimated at \$23.8 billion annually and entailed loss of productivity, absenteeism and health care costs (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). Furthermore, Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, and Zagecnyk (2013) report that abusive supervision is associated with low perceived organizational support; meaning that employees who reported being victims of abusive supervision view the organization as responsible for the supervisor's actions. As Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, and Rhoades (2002, p.572) state “Supervisors, to the extent

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that they are identified with the organization, contribute to perceived organizational support, and, ultimately, to job retention". In fact, in support of the reverse argument, [Tepper et al. \(2009\)](#) found a positive relationship between employees' reports of abusive supervision and their turnover intentions. In addition to the costs presented above, employee turnover can be harmful to organizational performance ([Glebbeek & Bax, 2004](#)) as well as replacement costs which are often very high ([Hinkin & Tracey, 2000](#)).

1.2. Antecedents of abusive supervision

Social dominance orientation, which is associated with values of social hierarchy, status, power and the pursuit of self-interests, has been shown to be positively related to interpersonal deviance in the workplace and abusive supervision ([Shao, Resick, & Hargis, 2011](#)). [Hodson, Hogg, and MacInnis \(2009\)](#) found that Dark Triad Personalities [i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism] predict social dominance orientation and that the highest correlation was with psychopathy. Although psychopathy has not yet been studied in relation to abusive supervision, research seems to indicate that there might be a link between the two concepts.

[Spector \(2011\)](#) views abusive supervision as one form of counter-productive work behavior (CWB) and presents a model in which trait anger, negative affectivity and narcissism influence the outset of CWB. In their review on abusive supervision, [Martinko, Harvey, Brees, and Mackey \(2013\)](#) suggest that by adapting general models of workplace aggression (such as Spector's CWB model), research will be able to build a strong conceptual base for a model of abusive supervision specifically. [Tepper \(2007\)](#), in his review, proposes an agenda for future research on abusive supervision that includes the exploration of the role of supervisor's personality traits. For instance, he hypothesizes that low agreeableness, a history of aggressive behaviors, as well as narcissism could possibly be associated with abusive supervision. So far, research has found that all Dark Triad personalities are associated with CWB ([O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012](#)); there is thus reason to suggest that Dark Triad personalities are associated with abusive supervision. Yet, very few, if any studies have been conducted on specific personality antecedents of abusive supervision, and, to our knowledge, there are no studies that explored the relationship between psychopathy and abusive supervision, per se.

1.3. Abusive supervision and corporate psychopathy

Psychopathy is a construct that is composed of four factors or dimensions, labeled as follows: *Interpersonal* (Glibness/superficial charm, Grandiose sense of self-worth, Pathological lying, Conning/manipulative); *Affective* (Lack of remorse or guilt, Shallow affect, Callous/lack of empathy, Failure to accept responsibility for actions); *Lifestyle* (Need for stimulation/proneness to boredom, Parasitic lifestyle, Lack of realistic long-term goals, Impulsivity, Irresponsibility); and *Antisocial* (Poor behavioral controls, Early behavior problems, Juvenile delinquency, Revocation of conditional release, Criminal versatility) (from the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), [Hare, 2003](#); see also [Neumann, Hare, & Newman, 2007](#); [Neumann, Hare, & Pardini, 2014](#)).

Of the constructs that comprise the Dark Triad, research indicates that psychopathy seems to be the most dishonest ([Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006](#)), treacherous ([Paulhus & Williams, 2002](#)), and destructive ([Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010](#)) of the three. [Jones and Paulhus \(2010\)](#) found that individuals high on psychopathy showed more aggressive tendencies than people high on narcissism or Machiavellianism, even when unprovoked. Similarly, [Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, and Vernon \(2012\)](#), in a study of bullying in adults, reported that psychopathy was more strongly associated with bullying behavior, followed by Machiavellianism and narcissism. A recent study by [Jones and Neria \(2015\)](#) on Dark Triad personalities and different types of aggression also found that psychopathy presented

the highest correlations with regards to physical and verbal aggression, anger and hostility. [Jonason, Slomski, and Partyka \(2012\)](#) found that, of the Dark Triad personalities, psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated with the use of hard manipulation tactics (assertiveness and direct manipulation) while narcissism and Machiavellianism were associated with the use of soft manipulation tactics (ingratiation and reason).

Although many of these conclusions were drawn from research on the general population, we believe that they also apply to the workplace. In a study of supervisors, [Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, et al. \(2014\)](#) found that employees' ratings of psychopathic traits in their direct supervisor predicted employees' psychological distress, work-family conflict and job dissatisfaction. Furthermore, [Mathieu and Babiak \(2015\)](#) reported that psychopathic traits in supervisors predicted employees' job dissatisfaction, lower work motivation, psychological distress and turnover intentions better than supervisor's leadership style. In other words, we believe that psychopathy may be the most dangerous of the dark personalities in the workplace, yet, the behaviors by which supervisor's psychopathic traits influence employee's attitudes have yet to be fully explored. We believe that abusive supervisor behaviors might be one venue psychopathic individuals might use to express aggression in the workplace.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Employees from a non-profit organization were asked to participate in this project by completing a series of assessments. In total, 97 employees completed measures of corporate psychopathy and abusive supervision for their direct supervisor and self-report measures of their own turnover intentions and job satisfaction. Of the 97 participants, 34% were men ($n = 33$) and 66% women ($n = 64$). The ages ranged from 19 to 62 (mean = 33.2). On average, employees were in their current jobs for 4.5 years and had been employed by their company for 7 years (minimum = 1 month and maximum = 37 years). A total of 22 supervisors were assessed; on average, employees were supervised by their current superior for 4 years (minimum = 1 month maximum = 35 years).

This project was part of a larger study on personality in the workplace for which the first author has received ethics approval. The survey, including all of the measure for the larger project, took about 45 min to fill-out. Employees completed a paper-pencil version of the questionnaire during their work hours.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Corporate psychopathy

Participants rated their immediate supervisor on each of the 20 items on the B-Scan 360, a measure of corporate psychopathy in others. The development of the B-Scan 360 was based upon a widely used instrument for the assessment of psychopathy, the *Psychopathy Checklist-Revised* (PCL-R; [Hare, 2003](#)). Preliminary studies indicate that the B-Scan 360 has the same four-factor structure as the PCL-R ([Mathieu, Hare, Jones, Babiak, & Neumann, 2013](#); [Mathieu, Neumann, Babiak, et al., 2014](#)). The four factors (scales) on the B-Scan 360 are *Manipulative/Unethical* (Uses charm and deceit to manipulate others); *Callous/Insensitive* (Cold disregard for the feelings of others); *Unreliable/Unfocused* (Lacks commitment to goals and objectives); and *Intimidating/Aggressive* (Generally intimidating in the workplace). For the present study, we used the B-Scan 360 total score; items were rated using a 5-point Likert-like scale (1 = disagree strongly; 5 = agree strongly). Alpha coefficient for the B-Scan 360 was .79.

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