



Short Communication

When victims become culprits: The role of subordinates' neuroticism in the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the General Aggression Model, we examined the role of subordinates' neuroticism in strengthening the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance. Results revealed that Time 1 abusive supervision was positively related to Time 2 personnel records of workplace deviance measured 18 months later. Further, subordinates' neuroticism moderated this relationship. Specifically, there was a stronger positive relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance for employees with high as opposed to low levels of neuroticism. These findings highlight the need to account for the role of individual differences in influencing subordinates' responses to supervisor hostility. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Abusive supervision is described as “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Employees respond negatively to supervisor mistreatment, particularly by engaging in workplace deviance (i.e., behavior that violates organizational norms and is harmful to organizations and its members; Robinson & Bennett, 1997). This relationship has been explained using social exchange and displaced aggression frameworks. That is, upon experiencing abuse, subordinates will seek means for retribution but will do so indirectly for fear of further mistreatment from their more powerful supervisors (Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011). However, the likelihood of engaging in deviant behavior may differ between individuals (Jensen & Patel, 2011; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). This variation in behavioral reaction can be attributed to personality differences that predispose individuals towards negative affect

and hostility (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Restubog, Garcia, Wang, & Cheng, 2010). For instance, subordinates who endorse negative reciprocity beliefs (i.e., favoring retribution as a response to mistreatment) are more likely to engage in deviant behaviors following abusive supervision (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). As such, there have been several renewed calls to examine personality characteristics that may potentially influence how employees perceive and react towards abusive supervision (Henle & Gross, 2013; Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013).

In this research, we examine the moderating role of subordinates' neuroticism in the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance. Drawing upon the General Aggression Model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002), we conceptualize abusive supervision as a source of frustration that triggers a retaliatory response from the subordinate in the form of workplace deviance. We further argue that this positive relationship will be stronger for subordinates' with high levels of neuroticism due to their predisposition to experience negative emotions and increased sensitivity towards stressful situations. We view GAM not as a competing theory to replace previous theoretical perspectives but rather as a complementary perspective that adds depth to our understanding of why abused employees engage in behaviors harmful to the organization.

Prior work has examined the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance; however, it is not replete with methodological limitations (Martinko et al., 2013). Most

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notable has been the reliance of these studies on single source data (i.e., self-reports of both abusive supervision and workplace deviance). Researchers have been cautioned about assuming a common method variance effect from the use of self-reports. However, it does become an issue when the nature of the constructs under investigation lends itself to method effects such as social desirability and acquiescence (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). For example, given the sensitive nature of abusive supervision and workplace deviance, employees may have been influenced by social desirability which may have attenuated the existing relationships (Stewart, Bing, Davison, Woehr, & McIntyre, 2009). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis found that ratings of counterproductive behaviors significantly varied according to source (i.e., self-reports, supervisor, peer, and archival) with self-reports obtaining the smallest effect size (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Given this and following the suggestions of Podsakoff and colleagues (2012), this paper also aims to contribute to prior work on abusive supervision and workplace deviance by utilizing archival data on workplace deviance. Compared to self-report measures, archival data are less vulnerable to biases because they capture “observable, countable, and discrete outcomes” (Viswesvaran, 2001, p. 111).

A consistent body of empirical and theoretical work links abusive supervision with subordinate deviance targeting other individuals and the organization (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Restubog et al., 2011; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008). Researchers typically utilize social exchange or displaced aggression logic as the theoretical explanation for these relationships (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Restubog et al., 2011). In general, these theories suggest that individuals may engage in deviant behavior in response to abusive supervision because (a) they become motivated to retaliate against the abusive supervisor; or (b) they become motivated to displace their aggression onto the organization or other convenient targets.

An alternative theoretical explanation to the social exchange and displaced aggression perspectives can be derived from the GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Unlike previous theories, the GAM offers a useful framework for understanding the abusive supervision and employee deviance link by considering the role of both situational (e.g., interpersonal provocations) and individual (e.g., personality traits) factors in influencing hostile behaviors. Consistent with the behaviors that characterize abusive supervision, interpersonal provocations may include verbal (e.g., public ridicule) and non-verbal (e.g., silent treatment) forms of hostility that interferes with one's ability to attain valued goals (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). According to the GAM, these episodes of provocation activate aggression-related thoughts and emotions, which then drive aggressive and retaliatory behavior. In the context of the present study, we conceive of abusive supervision as a form of interpersonal provocation that is likely to trigger aggression directed towards subordinates. Subordinates will engage in workplace deviance as a form of retaliation that serves to express frustrations and gain retribution from abusive treatment.

The GAM also recognizes that stable individual differences may interact with situational triggers to increase or decrease the likelihood of aggressive behavior. For instance, certain personality traits predispose individuals to more frequently experience negative affect which influences their interpretation of and reaction towards interpersonal provocations (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). One such trait is neuroticism, generally defined as an individual's propensity to experience negative affect, such as anxiety, anger, and frustration (McCrae & John, 1992). Individuals high in neuroticism were found to be more reactive to interpersonal conflicts due to their tendency to experience more negative emotions and heightened sensitivity towards distress (McCrae & John, 1992). Indeed, neurotic individuals were found to be more focused on and reactive towards negative as opposed to positive daily events

(Longua, DeHart, Tennen, & Armeli, 2009). Thus, we argue that subordinates high in neuroticism are more likely to overreact and experience stronger negative affect in response to hostile supervisory treatment than those low in neuroticism.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

The research was carried out in a regional public sector organization in the Philippines. At Time 1, surveys were administered to 270 employees attending a company-sponsored training initiative. Attached to the questionnaire was a cover letter explaining the purpose of the research and provision for confidentiality and voluntary participation. The questionnaires were prepared in English because a vast majority of the Filipino population speak this language (Bernardo, 2004). Two hundred and three participants chose to participate in the Time 1 survey yielding a response rate of 74.44%. At Time 2, eighteen months after Time 1 data collection, we contacted the 203 participants to seek permission to access their personnel files which contained actual reports or incidents of deviant behaviors. A total of 164 participants agreed to participate which corresponded to a participation rate of 80.79%. After eliminating records with unmatched data and missing responses, this has resulted in a matched sample of 156. In order to protect the identity of the participants, a senior research assistant matched the survey responses with the employees' personnel files using the participant-generated code. Neither the organizational representatives nor the research team had access to both pieces of information. Of the 156 participants, 53.2% were women. A large majority of the participants (92.3%) were between 36 to 45 years old. Average tenure was 21.8 years. Participants were in non-supervisory roles.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Abusive supervision

At Time 1, participants were instructed to rate the extent to which their supervisor engaged in abusive behaviors (1 = I cannot remember him/her using this behavior with me to 7 = S/he always uses this behavior towards me). Given the time constraints imposed by the participating organization, we used a 5-item shortened version of the abusive supervision scale which has been used in previous research (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Example items were: “My immediate supervisor puts me down in front of others” and “My supervisor tells I'm incompetent”. Bivariate correlations in an independent sample of 148 MBA part-time students in the Philippines indicated that the shortened and full versions of this scale are highly related ($r = .97, p < .01$). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .91.

2.2.2. Subordinates' neuroticism

Neuroticism was measured using six-item shortened measure (7 point Likert scale, 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*) derived from John and Srivastava (1999). Example items include: “I get nervous easily”, “I can be tense”, and “I worry a lot”. Bivariate correlations in an independent sample of 400 workers from a wide-variety of occupations in the Philippines indicated that the shortened and full version of this scale are highly correlated, $r = .96, p < .001$. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .96.

2.2.3. Workplace deviance

We operationalized workplace deviance based on frequency counts of workplace offenses obtained from personnel records in a period spanning 18 months after Time 1 data collection.

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