



Perceptions of abusive supervision: The role of subordinates' attribution styles[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Empirical work on the concept of abusive supervision typically employs measurements of subordinates' perceptions of abuse as the primary dependent variable. This study began with a test of the notion that a significant proportion of subordinates' perceptions of abuse can be explained by individual differences in subordinates' attribution styles and their perceptions of the quality of their Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) relationships. Results indicated that subordinates' hostile attribution styles were positively related to subordinates' perceptions of abuse and negatively related to subordinates' LMX perceptions. We also found evidence that the abusive supervision and LMX constructs are confounded. The results call into question the conceptual and empirical distinctions between the abusive supervision and LMX constructs and indicate that attribution style plays a significant role in these perceptions.

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1. Introduction

There has been considerable recent attention devoted to the construct of abusive supervision. [Tepper, Duffy, Henle, and Lambert \(2006\)](#) estimated that abusive supervision costs U.S. organizations 23 billion dollars yearly as a result of increases in absenteeism, health care costs, and productivity losses. In addition to the monetary costs, researchers indicate that abusive supervision is associated with numerous other undesirable organizational outcomes including counterproductive behaviors such as aggression and sabotage ([Detert & Trevino, 2007](#); [Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007](#); [Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009](#)), and decreases in organizational citizenship ([Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002](#)) and commitment ([Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002](#)).

In addition to organizational costs, research demonstrates that perceptions of abusive supervision are associated with numerous negative personal outcomes including distress ([Tepper, 2000, 2007](#)), work–family conflict ([Hoobler & Brass, 2006](#)), poor job performance ([Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007](#)), and decreased job and life satisfaction ([Tepper, 2000](#)).

In view of the serious personal and organizational costs associated with perceptions of abusive supervision, a number of studies have attempted to explain its causes. For the most part, these studies have focused almost exclusively on the characteristics of supervisors and their behaviors as the primary explanation for perceptions of supervisory abuse. For example, recent studies have explored the relationships between subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision and supervisors' perceptions of organizational justice ([Hoobler & Brass, 2006](#); [Tepper et al., 2006](#); [Zellars et al., 2002](#)) as well as supervisors' personality traits ([Tepper et al., 2006](#)).

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We view it as somewhat ironic that, given that the major dependent variable in the abusive supervision literature is *subordinates' perceptions* of abuse, there appears to be very little research studying the antecedents of subordinates' abuse perceptions. We recognize that abusive behaviors by supervisors, as suggested by the current literature (e.g., [Tepper, 2007](#)), undoubtedly play a significant and perhaps the most significant role in shaping subordinates' perceptions. However, we also suspect that there is considerable variability between and among subordinates in their abuse perceptions of the same supervisors. As a result, we predict that the individual differences of subordinates also play a significant role in perceptions of abusive supervision.

In this study, our objective is explicate and test the notion that the individual differences of subordinates are related to and account for a significant proportion of the variability in their perceptions of abusive supervision. Although there are undoubtedly many individual differences that may influence perceptions of abuse, we will specifically explore and test the propositions that differences in subordinates' attributions styles and their perceptions of the quality of their Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) relationships will explain a significant amount of the variability in subordinates' perceptions. We begin by first exploring the construct of abusive supervision. We then review the current research on abusive supervision within the context of attribution and LMX theory, generating hypotheses that are tested in the methods section. The article ends by considering the implications of our findings for the study and management of abusive supervision and LMX perceptions.

At the outset it should also be noted that our initial interest was not in validating the construct of abusive supervision. Our goal was simply to demonstrate that the construct is more complex and prone to perceptual distortion than appears to be assumed. We believe that our results demonstrate that attribution styles account for a significant proportion of the variance in subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision as well as their LMX perceptions. Our results also indicate that more needs to be done to understand the causes and implications of both abuse and LMX perceptions.

2. The construct of abusive supervision

Abusive supervision is defined 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](#)). [Tepper](#) expanded on the construct by indicating that abusive supervision is a willful act on the part of supervisors, but in a later work he explained that because abusive supervision is a subjective assessment, its perceived occurrence can be influenced by subordinate characteristics such as personality and demographics ([Tepper, 2007](#)). This implies that two subordinates could each view the same supervisor's behavior differently. One could see the supervisor's behavior as abusive, while another subordinate could view the same behavior as appropriate.

A clear implication of the limits and constraints placed on the definition of the abusive supervision construct is that, because it is dependent on subordinates' perceptions and because subordinates' perceptions may differ, at least some of the variance in reports of abusive supervision may be accounted for by individual differences among subordinates. Moreover, if individual differences do account for a significant proportion of variance in abusive supervision perceptions, we cannot infer that the costs associated with these perceptions are all due to abusive behaviors by supervisors. Given that the costs of abusive supervision described above are significant, it appears that if we are to fully explain and comprehend the causes and consequences of perceptions of abusive supervision, we must also explore and understand how the individual differences among subordinates are related to perceptions of abuse.

3. Attributions and perceptions of abusive supervision

While there are numerous characteristics of subordinates that may be related to their perceptions of abuse, we believe that attributions and attribution styles are particularly important for three reasons. First, there has been a long history of research investigating the relationships between attributions and leader-member relations validating the importance of attributions (see [Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007](#) for a review). Second, although a limited amount of research on individual differences related to abusive supervision has been done, the few studies that we are aware of suggest that attributional factors are important, as discussed below. Finally, attribution theory itself focuses on the process by which people form causal explanations for significant life outcomes. We believe that perceptions of having been abused are exactly the type of outcomes that attribution theorists have aspired to understand and explain. Thus, attribution theory appears to be particularly suited to describing the factors related to how individuals develop perceptions of abuse. In this section, we provide a brief review of attribution theory and then incorporate the research that has been done in the area of abusive supervision and leader-member relations into an attributional framework and generate propositions that are tested later in the paper.

3.1. Attribution theory

Attributions and attribution theory are concerned with peoples' causal explanations for their outcomes ([Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1986](#)). Typical causal explanations include ability, effort, the nature of the task, and chance. Research has demonstrated that these causal explanations can be mapped onto underlying causal dimensions that are consistently related with emotions, expectancies, and behaviors ([Weiner, 1986](#)).

The two most commonly researched causal dimensions are locus of causality and stability. Locus of causality is concerned with whether the cause of an outcome resides within the person (internal) or outside of the person (external). The stability dimension classifies causes as enduring and stable versus unstable and transient. Locus of causality affects emotions while stability affects

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