



# Abusive supervision and the entitled employee

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## ABSTRACT

We present two studies that examine the effects of psychological entitlement on employees' ratings of abusive supervision and their behavioral reactions to these perceptions. Study 1 indicated that entitlement was positively associated with ratings of abusive supervision. Perceived abuse was, in turn, associated with upward undermining behaviors and organizational deviance. In Study 2, we re-examined the hypothesized relationships using paired data from employees and their coworkers. The results replicated those from the first study and showed that entitled employees rated supervisors as more abusive than coworkers who shared the same supervisors. Although this variance is likely driven by a combination of perceptual distortion and actual abusive behaviors, the ultimate implication is that psychologically entitled employees are prone to feel that they are victims of abuse and to react in undesirable ways.

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## 1. Introduction

Abusive supervision has been studied extensively in the organizational sciences, with findings consistently showing abuse by supervisors to be a common and problematic phenomenon. The great majority of this research (see [Tepper, 2007](#) for a review) has examined abusive supervision from the perspective of subordinates. That is, levels of abuse by supervisors are typically rated by the subordinates of those same supervisors. This is a logical perspective, given that employees are presumably well positioned to observe how their supervisors treat them. A potential problem is that, despite their vantage point, employees' ratings of abusive supervision are ultimately perceptions and, as [Tepper \(2000, p. 178\)](#) noted, "two subordinates could differ in their evaluations of the same supervisor's behavior."

Thus, it is theoretically possible that employees could differ in their opinion of whether or not a supervisor is abusive, with important consequences for the supervisor and the larger organization. A study by [Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, and Douglas \(2011\)](#) argued this point and demonstrated that the strength of employees' hostile attributional biases influenced their abusive supervision ratings. They noted that this effect might be caused both by perceptual distortion on the part of subordinates and by actual abusive supervisory behaviors provoked by employees' conduct. Particularly relevant to the present article is that regardless of whether the heightened abuse ratings corresponded to inflated perceptions of abuse, actual increases in abuse, or some combination of the two, an implication is that employees with biased perceptual styles believed they were experiencing more abuse, and likely responded as such.

The studies presented here investigate whether psychological entitlement influences employee ratings of abuse. Like abusive supervision, psychological entitlement is a widespread problem in contemporary organizations (e.g., [Alsop, 2008](#); [Twenge & Foster, 2008](#)) and involves employees who feel they deserve high levels of praise and rewards that are not commensurate with their actual ability and effort levels ([Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004](#); [Naumann, Minsky, & Sturman, 2002](#)). In

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Study 1, we test the argument that these tendencies are positively related to abusive supervision ratings. Study 1 also builds on research indicating that abuse is associated with deviant retaliatory behaviors (e.g., Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007) and investigates whether perceptions of abusive supervision mediate the relationship between entitlement and self-reported levels of retaliation. Study 2 replicates Study 1 with coworker-reported measures of focal employees' retaliatory behaviors and compares abusive supervision ratings provided by pairs of employees who share the same supervisors.

As suggested above, a challenge in this research is separating the influence of entitlement on *perceptions* of abuse from *actual* abuse by a supervisor. This is particularly true when single-source data is used, as in the aforementioned Martinko et al. (2011) study. While it is difficult to design a study that definitively assesses perceived versus actual abuse, Study 2 attempts to at least partially do so by comparing abusive supervision scores of entitled employees against those of coworkers who share the same supervisor. To the extent that higher ratings of abuse from entitled employees do reflect actual increases in abuse, the implication that entitled employees could drive generally non-abusive supervisors to engage in abusive behaviors is also noteworthy.

We argue that this line of inquiry is important for understanding the subjective nature of abusive supervision ratings. This aspect of abusive supervision has received minimal research attention despite the overtly subjective nature of frequently used measures of abuse (e.g., Tepper, 2000). We also aim to contribute to the small but growing body of research on psychological entitlement in the workplace. Given the apparent ubiquity of entitlement issues in the modern workplace, research into this phenomenon is relevant for both practitioners and organizational scholars. This is particularly true given the ominous nature of the arguments tested here, which suggest that psychological entitlement promotes retaliatory behaviors and might pose a threat to the careers and livelihoods of managers if it provokes abusive behaviors or causes employees to view legitimate managerial behaviors (e.g., constructive negative feedback) as abusive.

## 2. Psychological entitlement and perceptions of abusive supervision

Psychological entitlement refers to a stable (i.e., trait-like) and global tendency toward favorable self-perceptions and reward expectations that exists even when there is little justification for such beliefs (Campbell et al., 2004; Naumann et al., 2002; Snow, Kern, & Curlette, 2001). This differs from justifiable forms of entitlement that occur when talented employees are accurate in their self-perceptions and justified in their reward expectations. Psychological entitlement is also associated with other traits that can distort employees' workplace perceptions such as self-serving attributional biases (Harvey & Martinko, 2009), narcissism, selfish tendencies and ego-defensiveness (Campbell et al., 2004).

Entitlement is also associated with a consistent reluctance to accept criticism that undermines positive self-views and a tendency toward high expectations concerning rewards and praise (Naumann et al., 2002; Snow et al., 2001). These expectations often go unfulfilled because they are typically not consistent with actual abilities and effort levels (Naumann et al., 2002), resulting in frequent disappointment and frustration (Harvey & Harris, 2010; Robinson, 2007) that can manifest themselves in negative workplace attitudes and behaviors (Campbell et al., 2004; Harvey & Martinko, 2009).

Psychological entitlement appears to be an area of disconnect between existing research and the concerns of practicing managers. By numerous accounts (Alsop, 2008; Campbell et al., 2004; Fisk, 2010; Twenge & Foster, 2008), unfounded entitlement perceptions have become a common problem for managers but only a handful of published articles have examined entitlement in the workplace (e.g., Fisk, 2010; Harvey & Harris, 2010; Harvey & Martinko, 2009; Naumann et al., 2002). This research, combined with findings from the social psychology literature (e.g., Campbell et al., 2004; Derber, 1978; Snow et al., 2001; Stouten, De Cremer, & van Dijk, 2005) sheds some light on the cognitive processes and behavioral outcomes associated with entitlement.

Abusive supervision has received substantially more research attention (see Tepper, 2007). As Martinko, Harvey, Brees, and Mackey (in press) argued, however, the extent to which the employee ratings of abusive supervision in many of these studies are influenced by subjective perceptions versus actual abusive behaviors is unclear. In this section, we develop the argument that psychologically entitled employees are more likely to perceive supervisors as abusive, as shown in Fig. 1.

### 2.1. Abusive supervision as a perception

The argument that psychological entitlement promotes abusive supervision perceptions is rooted in the notion that what an employee believes is abusive is at least somewhat subjective. This is captured in Tepper's (2000, p. 178) definition of abusive supervision, which describes the phenomenon as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors." Tepper goes on to explain that "this definition characterizes abusive supervision as a subjective assessment." Consistent with this subjective characterization, abusive supervision is typically measured using items that assess subordinates' beliefs that their supervisors engage in behaviors such as making threats, breaking promises, or ignoring employees (Tepper, 2000; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006).

Martinko et al. (2011) attempted to illustrate the subjectivity of abuse perceptions by demonstrating that individuals with a tendency to attribute negative outcomes to external and stable causes (e.g., one's supervisor) reported relatively low quality exchange relationships with their supervisors and were more likely to view their supervisors as abusive than employees who lacked this attributional bias. Although their study design did not allow for a comparison of ratings by different employees of the same supervisors, their findings provide preliminary evidence that an employee's perceptual biases can influence their ratings of abusive supervision.

This notion that employees can differ in their assessment of the same leader behaviors is fairly well established in research on other forms of undesirable supervisor behaviors. In the sexual harassment literature, for example, meta-analysis has shown

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