Subordinate social adaptability and the consequences of abusive supervision perceptions in two samples

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ABSTRACT

The present investigation examined social adaptability as a moderator of the relationships between perceptions of abusive supervision and several work outcomes. Specifically, we hypothesized that individuals with lower levels of social adaptability would be more adversely affected by heightened levels of abusive supervision perceptions than employees with greater levels of social adaptability. Data from two samples offered strong support for the hypotheses. Specifically, employees with lower levels of social adaptability reported heightened job tension (i.e., Sample 1) and emotional exhaustion (Samples 1 & 2), as well as diminished job satisfaction (Samples 1 & 2) and work effort (Samples 1 & 2) as perceptions of abusive supervision increased, whereas employees with greater social adaptability skill were less strongly affected by their perceptions of abusive supervision. Contributions of the research to scholarship and practice, strengths and limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.

"We must make the best of those ills which cannot be avoided."

[~Alexander Hamilton]

1. Introduction

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). It represents a context within which stressful stimuli impact subordinates to produce various strain reactions. Subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision have been associated with numerous stress-related outcomes, including job tension (Breaux, Perrewé, Hall, Frink, & Hochwarter, 2008), anxiety (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007), psychological well-being (Hobman, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2009), physical health (Bowling & Michel, 2011), insomnia (Rafferty, Restubog, & Jimmieson, 2010), problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006), burnout (Carlson, Ferguson, Hunter, & Whitten, 2012), and emotional exhaustion (Yagil, 2006).

Moreover, perceptions of abusive supervision also have been linked to important life and workplace outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Tepper, 2000), organizational commitment (Duffy & Ferrier, 2003), work withdrawal (Chi & Liang, 2013), life satisfaction (Tepper, 2000), work–family conflict (Hoobler & Hu, 2013), and family satisfaction and functioning (Carlson, Ferguson, Perrewé, & Whitten, 2011). Finally, employee perceptions of abusive supervision also have harmful consequences for organizations, such as damaging effects on formal performance appraisals (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007), task performance (Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012), and organizational citizenship behavior (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Summarizing these results, Schyns and Schilling (2013) provided a meta-analytic review of outcomes associated with perceptions of abusive supervision and destructive leadership.

Research has shown that employee characteristics can mitigate the adverse effects of negative work stimuli (e.g., Perrewé et al., 2004; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001). Thus, individual differences may exist that serve to attenuate the relationship between subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision and negative work outcomes. For example, effective self-management has been noted as a useful means to cope with adverse consequences of narcissistic supervisors (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012). However, little abusive supervision research to date has focused on subordinates' abilities to adapt to demands and coercions associated with interpersonal threats (i.e., abusive supervisors), and the stressful contexts such behaviors create for workers.

Social adaptability has been defined as an ability to acclimate or feel content in a wide range of interpersonal situations (Cooper & Hetherington, 2005), and it represents an individual difference factor that facilitates effectiveness in contexts characterized by rapid change and varying demands (e.g., Baron & Markman, 2003; LePine, Colquitt, & Erez, 2000; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000). For decades, scholars have recognized the importance of adaptability to address demands created by precipitously shifting work landscapes (Hormiga, Batista-Canino, & Sanchez-Medina, 2011; Strang, 1930). As an example, recent studies have associated adaptability with favorable reactions to advances in technology, globalization, economic crises, and a host of other environmental shifts (Koopmans et al., 2011; Pulakos, Dorsey, & White, 2006).

Building on these studies, scholars affirm that individuals must be adaptable in order to effectively manage the frequently chaotic structural elements of contemporary work environments (Baron & Tang, 2009). Incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach, we bring together conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) and self-regulation (Tepper et al., 2007; Thau & Mitchell, 2010) scholarship to explain the dynamics of social adaptability's moderating role on the relationships between abusive supervision and several important cognitive (i.e., job tension, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion) and behavioral (i.e., work effort) consequences (Tepper, 2007). Advancing science and practice, this integrative resources-regulation perspective argues that differences in social adaptability represent an individual difference factor capable of explaining deleterious consequences of abusive supervision.

This research makes two primary contributions to the abusive supervision literature. First, we enhance our understanding of the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and workplace outcomes by examining the role of social adaptability. Second, we integrate theories on conservation of resources and self-regulation into an integrative resources-regulation theoretical perspective yet to be fully examined in prior abusive supervision research.

2. Background research, theory, and hypothesis development

2.1. The abusive supervision context

2.1.1. Moderators of abusive supervision–outcome relationships

Described as subordinates' subjective perceptions of a sustained display of non-physical hostility, abusive supervision is characterized as a low base-rate phenomenon with important effects on both employee attitudes and behaviors (Tepper, 2007) and organization success (Martinko, Sikora, & Harvey, 2012). By definition, abusive supervision is a subjective assessment made by subordinates, which can be biased by employees' past experiences and current personality characteristics, including both demographics and situational factors (Tepper, 2007).

Several studies have investigated the potential role of personality and other individual characteristics in abusive supervision contexts. For example, Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, and Kacmar (2007) examined ingratiation and positive affect as possible moderators of abusive supervision outcomes, and found a cumulative neutralizing effect on abuse. Most recently, Hu (2012) found that high levels of employees' emotional intelligence attenuated the relationship between employees' perceptions of supervisory abuse and emotional labor burden.

Consistent with these studies, employees' perceptions of, and responses to, abusive supervision likely depend on subordinate characteristics in addition to the behaviors of supervisors. However, our understanding of such personal characteristic moderators of the abusive supervision–subordinate outcomes relationships is far from complete or conclusive (Tepper, 2007). We suggest that subordinate social adaptability represents a personal characteristic that buffers against the negative consequences of abusive supervision perceptions.

2.2. Social adaptability

2.2.1. Nature of the construct

Social adaptability refers to one's ability to adjust cognitions and modify behaviors in response to changing situational demands and threats (Baron & Tang, 2009). In terms of its underlying characteristics, Ployhart and Bliese (2006, p. 13) suggested, "individual adaptability represents an individual's ability, skill, disposition, willingness, and/or motivation, to change or fit different task, social, and environmental features." In line with our conceptualization, Chan (2000) noted that some individuals are more adaptable than others, and that this personal attribute remains largely consistent over time. As a result of both consistency and flexibility, highly adaptive employees are able to better recognize changes in important situational cues, interpret events as challenging rather than stressful, and identify how situations should change relative to employees with low levels of adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

2.2.2. Theory and research

To date, much of the adaptability literature has associated the construct with performance-related outcomes (Chan, 2000; Ployhart & Bliese, 2006; Pulakos et al., 2000; Shoss, Witt, & Vera, 2012), as a predictor of transition management (Baron & Markman, 2003; Baron & Tang, 2009; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), or as a determinant of entrepreneurial success (Haynie, Shepherd, Mosakowski, & Earley, 2009; Hormiga et al., 2011). For example, LePine et al. (2000) used a knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) approach to