

Abusive supervisory reactions to coworker relationship conflict

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ABSTRACT

This study extends research on abusive supervision by exploring how supervisor reports of conflict with their coworkers are related to abusive behaviors and resulting outcomes. We utilize research on displaced aggression, conflict, and leader–member exchange (LMX) theory to formulate our hypotheses. Results from two samples of 121 and 134 matched supervisor–subordinate dyads support the idea that supervisors experiencing coworker relationship conflict are likely to engage in abusive behaviors directed toward their subordinates and that LMX quality moderates this relationship. Additionally, abusive supervision was associated with decreased work effort and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB). Results also indicate that in both samples abusive supervision mediates the relationships between supervisor reports of coworker relationship conflict and OCB, and in one sample mediates the association between supervisor-reported coworker relationship conflict and work effort.

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1. Introduction

Abusive supervision, or the prolonged hostile treatment of subordinates, has been recognized as a significant threat to employee well being and productivity in both the popular press (e.g., Elmer, 2006) and in organizational research (e.g., Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007; Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000, 2007; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Behaviors that fall under the umbrella of abusive supervision, such as sabotaging, yelling at, or ignoring subordinates, have been linked to an array of negative consequences (see Tepper, 2007 for an overview). Research also suggests that these forms of abuse are alarmingly common in modern organizations (Namie & Namie, 2000; Tepper, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to develop and test a conceptual model that expands our knowledge of antecedents, moderators, and consequences of abusive supervision. We also build on past research showing that supervisors' relationship conflicts can "trickle down" to subordinates in the form of abusive behaviors (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007). Specifically, we test the notion that supervisors who experience relationship conflict, defined as interpersonal "tension, animosity, and annoyance" (Jehn, 1995, p. 258), with their coworkers respond by abusing subordinates.

The proposed relationship between supervisor-level coworker relationship conflict and abusive supervision is rooted in the notion of displaced aggression, which occurs when the reaction to an unpleasant outcome or behavior from one source is redirected to a second source (Miller, Pedersen, Earlywine, & Pollock, 2003; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). Consistent with Tepper (2007), we argue that the relatively weak retaliatory power of subordinates, as compared to coworkers, increases the likelihood that relationship conflict-driven frustration will be vented at subordinates. We qualify this assumption, however, by arguing that supervisors who experience coworker relationship conflict will not behave abusively toward all of their subordinates. We explore

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this idea by examining leader–member relationship (LMX) quality as a moderator of the relationship between supervisors' levels of coworker relationship conflict and abusive supervision. Finally, we advance the extant research by investigating two supervisor-rated employee outcomes (work effort, and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB)), one of which has not previously been examined in the context of abusive supervision. These outcomes were chosen as they extend the literature and we were interested in actual behaviors directed toward the job/task (work effort and task-focused OCB). We examine these relationships, shown in Fig. 1, in two separate samples of matched supervisor–subordinate dyads.

Thus, the current study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we examine the influence of conflict between supervisors on subordinate reports of abusive supervision. Examining this relationship is important because although coworker relationship conflicts have negative outcomes, studies have yet to investigate how supervisors experiencing these conflicts treat their subordinates. Second, we investigate LMX quality as a relationship variable that changes how supervisor reports of coworker relationship conflict and abusive supervision are related. Third, we extend the nomological network of abusive supervision by examining the outcomes of work effort and OCB. Finally, we investigate the potential for abusive supervision to mediate the associations between supervisor reports of coworker relationship conflict and distal consequences. Thus, this study takes a first step toward explaining how (through the intermediary mechanism of abusive supervision) supervisors' experiences of coworker relationship conflict ultimately impact important job outcomes.

2. Abuse as a displaced response to coworker relationship conflict

Abusive supervision is defined as prolonged hostile treatment toward subordinates, excluding physical violence (Tepper, 2000). Research indicates that supervisors who perceive that they are victims of interactional or procedural injustice, both of which may be associated with coworker relationship conflict (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001), are relatively more likely than others to abuse their subordinates (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). Tepper, Duffy, Henle, and Lambert (2006) argued that this trickle-down effect, in which supervisors' frustrations are channeled into abusive behaviors targeted at subordinates, may occur because subordinates are a relatively safe target toward which supervisors can vent their frustrations (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). This argument suggests abusive supervision may be a response to frustrating workplace events such as coworker relationship conflict.

Coworker conflict has been linked to undesirable emotional states and can negatively impact interpersonal relationships (e.g., Bergmann & Volkema, 1994; Deutch, 1969). Emotion research suggests that the anger and frustration associated with interpersonal conflict can promote verbal (e.g., shouting) and behavioral (e.g., theft, sabotage, violence) aggression toward those who stimulate the conflict (e.g., Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939; Fox & Spector, 1999; Greenberg, 1990; Spector, 1975). Many of these behaviors, with the exception of physical violence, would fall under Tepper's (2000) definition of abusive supervision if aimed at subordinates. Drawing on findings from research on displaced aggression we argue that, due to the relative power of supervisors' coworkers, these relationship conflict-driven behaviors might, in fact, be targeted at subordinates.

Displaced aggression occurs when individuals experience mistreatment from one party and respond by mistreating a second party (Hoobler & Brass, 2006, Miller, Pedersen, Earlywine & Pollock, 2003, Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Several triggers of displaced aggression have been identified, including social rejection (Twenge & Campbell, 2003) and negative feedback (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Hoobler and Brass (2006) also showed that abusive supervision at work can promote displaced aggression toward family members at home. We examine abusive supervision as a form of displaced aggression rather than a predictor, although both conceptualizations are logical. Displaced aggression is often triggered by unpleasant workplace events (e.g., Miller, Pedersen, Earlywine & Pollock, 2003) and abusive supervision fits this criteria. We argue that abusive supervision also can fit the criteria of displaced aggression if it is triggered by events beyond the control of subordinates, such as the abusers' coworker relationship conflict. Thus, abusive supervision can likely be both a cause of displaced aggression and a type of displaced aggression.

Note: Dashed lines represent hypothesized mediated linkages

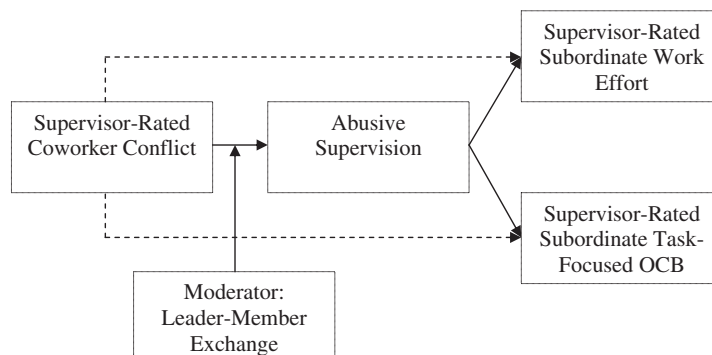


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

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