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A Preliminary Model of Abusive Behavior in Organizations

Matthew Valle

In this season of continuing financial turmoil and organizational discontent, individuals are coming to realize that organizational life often consists of roughly equal portions of good and bad. The “dark side” of organizational life, in which power serves to constrain, deny, and demoralize, lurks just beneath the surface of every organization, waiting for just the right moment to rear its ugly head. In light of the recent continuing revelations of wrongdoing by once trusted business professionals and organizations, researchers are increasingly turning their attentions to the negative aspects of power use (e.g., Aquino & Byron, 2002; Lubit, 2002), a development that many conclude is long overdue (e.g., Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002).

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One manifestation of negative power use is the concept of abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision would appear to be an element of power use within organizations expressly designed to create a negative environment between supervisor and subordinate. It is, perhaps, a subset of what Powell (1998) referred to in his theory of “the abusive organization.”

More specifically, abusive supervision is defined as the “sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors...” (Tepper, 2000, 178). Of course, just what constitutes abuse is in the eye of the beholder (e.g., Cropanzano, Howes, Grandy, & Toth, 1997; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). Bies (2000) described abusive supervision as consisting of public criticism, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions, and coercion. Ashforth (1997) described abusive behavior by supervisors as “petty tyranny” and Neuman and Baron (1997) described nonphysical workplace aggression as

components of abusive supervision. The concept of abusive supervision is multidimensional and may subsume many related, but conceptually distinct, forms of deviant organizational behavior. The form of the abuse may be verbal or nonverbal, hostile or mildly irritating. Regardless of its form or the operational definition one could use to describe abuse within the supervisor-subordinate dyad, the outcomes of abusive behavior cannot be beneficial for the target individual(s).

Ashforth (1997) found that tyrannical supervision led to frustration, helplessness, and alienation from work. Tepper (2000) found abusive supervision associated with lower job and life satisfaction, lower normative and affective commitment, work-family conflict, and increased job stress. Richman, Flaherty, Rospenda, and Christensen (1992) found abusive supervision led to increased dissatisfaction and increased job stress. Duffy et al. (2002) found social undermining (a form of abusive supervision)

led to negative outcomes for individuals. As interesting and as useful as these investigations are, no one has yet offered any rationale for the existence of abusive behavior. As such, this research seeks to support the ongoing examination of abusive supervision and to extend the theory by providing a number of possible antecedent causes of abusive behavior in organizations. Figure 1 describes a preliminary model of the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences of abusive supervision.

Since abusive supervision is a construct that describes relations between a supervisor and subordinate, or a supervisor and many subordinates, this research investigates the antecedents to that relationship more closely. Specifically, by identifying the general working relationship between

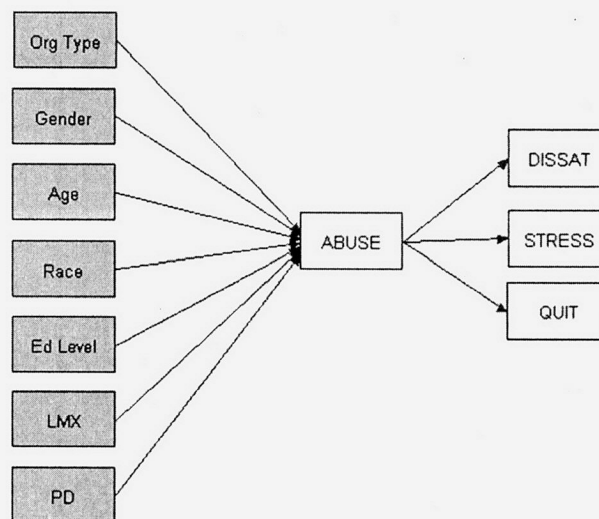
supervisor and subordinate (e.g., supervisor-subordinate relations), it may be possible to predict the extent to which the supervisor would engage in abusive supervision. If the general working relationship described by the subordinate were positive, abusive behavior on the part of the supervisor would be an unlikely occurrence. On the other hand, abusive behavior might be a more likely consequence of a negative working relationship between supervisor and subordinate. Further, identifying and defining the power distance associated with the relationship (e.g., low power distance describes a close working relationship) may predict the likelihood of abusive behavior by the supervisor. As such, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1: Positive supervisor-subordinate relations will be negatively related to abusive behaviors;

H2: High power distance (PD) will be positively related to abusive behaviors (ABO).

In addition to describing the relationships that might differentially predict abusive behavior, this research will investigate the relationships between abusive behavior and individual outcomes. Specifically, this research will seek to confirm the positive relationship between abusive behavior and job dissatisfaction, between abusive behavior and job stress, and potentially extend the literature by including intent to turnover as a behavioral consequence (also posited to be positively associated with abusive behavior).

Figure 1
Preliminary Model of Abusive Behavior in Organizations



Method

Subjects and Procedure

Participants were 77 full-time employees of a medium sized university in the south-eastern United States. The subjects held positions ranging from clerical to professional and included faculty, staff, and contract employees of the university. The subjects were directed to a research website (created specifically for this research) as part of a general university-wide call for research subjects. The website contained general information about the research, an informed consent page, and a data collection page that contained the online survey form. Due to the novel data collection process, the researcher did not have specific control over which subjects completed the survey nor additional information not called for on the web-based form. Given this research was interested in investigating general relationships among variables that were pertinent to a wide range of job types/

positions in organizations, this particular constraint was deemed inconsequential to the ultimate value of the research.

Demographic data were collected on the subject's gender, age, and race (see Table 1). Organizational type (public or private—some respondents were employed by a contractor working for the university) was measured and controlled for as was educational level. In addition to the demographic information, the survey contained scales to measure supervisor-subordinate relations, abusive behaviors, and perceptions of the job environment and personal outcomes (job satisfaction, job stress, and intentions to turnover).

Measures

Supervisor-subordinate relations. Supervisor-subordinate relations were measured with the 7-item Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) scale developed by Scandura, Graen, and Novak (1986). Examples of scale items include "My supervisor

understands my problems and needs" and "My working relationship with my supervisor is extremely effective." Responses to scale items ranged from "1" as the anchor for "Strongly Disagree" to "5" as the anchor for "Strongly Agree." The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency reliability estimate for the LMX scale was .92.

Supervisor-subordinate power distance. Supervisor subordinate power distance (PD) was measured with three items developed for this study. The items were: "In my relationship with my supervisor, it is clear who is the subordinate (me) and who is the supervisor (him/her)"; "My supervisor clearly sees me as a subordinate (and not as a peer)"; and "My supervisor keeps things from me in order to maintain a 'professional distance.'" Responses to scale items ranged from "1" as the anchor for "Strongly Disagree" to "5" as the anchor for "Strongly Agree." The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency reliability

Table 1
Demographic Data

Race	Percentage	Gender	Percentage	Age	Years
Asian	1.3	Male	50.6	Average	41.1
African-American	2.6	Female	49.4	S.D.	11.2
Hispanic	2.6				
White	92.2				
Other	1.3				

estimate for the power distance scale was .68.

Abusive behavior in organizations (ABO) scale. The 14-item scale used to measure abusive behavior in organizations is included as Appendix A. Items 26-28 comprise the subscale "Demeaning Behaviors"; items 29-31 comprise the subscale "Denying Behaviors"; items 32-34 comprise the subscale "Delaying Behaviors"; items 35-37 comprise the subscales "Lying Behaviors"; and items 38-39 comprise the subscale "Harassing Behaviors." Responses to scale items ranged from "1" as the anchor for "Strongly Disagree" to "5" as the anchor for "Strongly Agree." The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency reliability estimates were .83 (Demeaning), .81 (Denying), .85 (Delaying), .83 (Lying), and .17 (Harassing), respectively. The overall scale internal consistency reliability estimate was .92.

Job satisfaction (dissatisfaction), job stress, and intent to turnover. Job satisfaction was measured with two items from the Overall Job Satisfaction scale from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire, as contained in Cook, Hepworth, Wall, and Warr's *The Experience of Work* (1981). The items were worded in order to measure dissatisfaction: "All in all, I am NOT satisfied with my job," and "In general, I do not like my job." Job Stress was measured with five items from

the Job-Induced Tension scale of the Anxiety-Stress Questionnaire, also contained in Cook et al. (1981). Scale items include "I work under a great deal of tension" and "I have felt fidgety or nervous as a result of my job." Intent to turnover was measured with two items from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire, as contained in Cook et al. (1981). These items were "I often think about quitting my job," and "I will probably look for a new job in the next year." Responses to scale items ranged from "1" as the anchor for "Strongly Disagree" to "5" as the anchor for "Strongly Agree." The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency reliability estimates were .91, .79, and .83, respectively.

Analyses

Initially, the response rates on the various scale items were analyzed. Only two percent of the respondents indicated that they had experienced any form of harassment (items 38 and 39 on the scale in Appendix A), thus the harassment items and scale (part of the ABO scale) were dropped from further analyses. The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency reliability estimate of the reduced, 12-item ABO scale improved to .94 (from .92). SPSS was used to analyze the regression equations predicting changes in abusive behavior as a result of the influence of the control

variables (hierarchical level, organization type, gender, age, race, and educational level), LMX, and supervisor-subordinate power distance. The relationships between abusive behaviors and the outcomes job satisfaction (dissatisfaction), job stress, and intent to turnover were then analyzed. The results of those examinations are discussed in the following sections.

Results

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlation matrix of the study variables. As can be seen from Table 2, and in support of Hypotheses 1 and 2, positive supervisor-subordinate relations are negatively related to abusive behavior, and large power distance is positively related to abusive behavior.

Table 3 presents the results of the regression of the control variables and the main effects of LMX and PD on abusive behaviors. The first step was not significant ($F = 1.776, p < .132$). The second step was significant ($F = 7.306, p < .001$), and the overall equation explained 40 percent of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .40$). These results support Hypothesis 1 (LMX Beta = $-.621, p < .001$); however, the results indicate Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

The results also indicate that abusive behaviors are

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Matrix

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Organization Type	2.0667	.62240
Gender	1.4935	.50324
Age	41.1429	11.20587
Race	3.8701	.59273
Education Level	4.7200	.62731
LMX	3.6008	.95564
PD	3.0178	.95844
Dissatisfied	1.9286	1.05042
Stress	2.8880	.90419
Quit	2.2829	1.31488
Abuse	1.3114	.52164

Org type: 1=public organization, 2=private, non-profit organization, 3=private, for-profit organization

Gender: 1=male, 2=female

Race: 1=African American, 2=Hispanic, 3=Asian, 4=Caucasian, 5=Other

Ed level: 1=some high school, 2=high school completed, 3=some college, 4=college completed, 5=graduate work/degrees

	Org. Type	Gender	Age	Race	Education Level	LMX	PD	Dissatisfied	Stress	Quit	Abuse
Org. Type	1	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Gender	-.017	1	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
	.883	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Age	.147	-.008	1	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
	.207	.945	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Race	-.265	.218	.116	1	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
	.021	.057	.316	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Education Level	.076	-.254	.226	-.029	1	.	.	.	.	.	.
	.524	.028	.051	.807	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
LMX	.137	.139	.273	.123	.008	1	.	.	.	.	.
	.255	.242	.020	.300	.949	.	.	.	.	.	.
PD	-.096	-.112	-.265	-.011	-.013	-.387	1	.	.	.	.
	.418	.340	.022	.922	.913	.001	.	.	.	.	.
Dissatisfied	-.230	-.094	-.366	-.005	.031	-.498	.214	1	.	.	.
	.047	.415	.001	.969	.791	.000	.065	.	.	.	.
Stress	-.137	.099	-.071	-.113	-.143	-.057	.115	.186	1	.	.
	.246	.397	.543	.336	.229	.635	.332	.110	.	.	.
Quit	-.009	-.025	-.343	-.096	.105	-.533	.249	.804	.124	1	.
	.938	.829	.002	.407	.375	.000	.033	.000	.294	.	.
Abuse	-.240	-.196	-.070	-.020	.070	-.632	.238	.446	.137	.408	1
	.040	.090	.545	.863	.555	.000	.041	.000	.243	.000	.

The relationships hypothesized (and supported) are listed in bold.

Table 3
Results of Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
1	.359	.129	.056	.52787
2	.685	.469	.404	.41934

a Predictors: edu, race, age, org type, gender

b Predictors: LMX, PD

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.474	5	.495	1.776	.132
2	Regression	8.994	7	1.285	7.306	.000

a Predictors: edu, race, age, org type, gender

b Predictors: LMX, PD

c Dependent Variable: ABUSE

Coefficients

Model		Standardized Coefficients		
		Beta	T	Sig.
1	Org type	-.269	-2.096	.040
	Gender	-.238	-1.836	.071
	Age	-.026	-.203	.840
	Race	-.039	-.298	.767
	Education	.032	.246	.807
2	LMX	-.621	-5.814	.000
	PD	.002	.016	.988

a Dependent Variable: ABUSE

positively related to dissatisfaction ($r = .446, p < .001$) and intent to turnover ($r = .408, p < .001$). Abusive behaviors were not related to perceptions of job stress.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that poor supervisor-subordinate relations lead to perceptions of abuse within the supervisor-subordinate dyad. After controlling for the possible confounding effects of demographic and organizational variables, the measure

of supervisor-subordinate relations explained a significant additional proportion of variance in the dependent variable abusive behavior. This observation is a positive start in the quest to examine the antecedent causes of abuse within organizations (Tepper, 2000).

Power distance was not related to abusive behavior. It could be, given this construct was intended to measure the closeness of the working relationship between supervisor and subordinate, supervisors within the sample

group exhibited equal measures of positive high and low power distance. As such, any relationship between power distance and abusive behavior would have been (statistically) washed out. With regard to outcomes, greater perceptions of abuse led to dysfunctional consequences, namely increased dissatisfaction and higher intentions to turnover.

These results confirm the negative relationship between abuse and satisfaction and extend the literature by identifying a link between

abusive behavior and intentions to turnover. Interestingly, while not hypothesized, the bivariate correlations between gender and abuse, and organizational type and abuse, suggest that women are more likely to perceive abuse within the dyad and that abuse is less likely to be perceived in private organizations.

Such "revelations" may not astound organizational participants, but they do empirically confirm what is suspected with regard to abusive supervision as one of a class of deviant organizational behaviors. The value in such examinations may be less in what they discover and more in what they affirm. Specifically, managers need to understand the effects negative influence and relationships have on their subordinates. The motto "People are our most important asset" takes on added significance when it is considered that, given the isomorphic nature of organizations and products and strategies and operations, human resources represent the one remaining avenue of sustained competitive advantage left in the quest for organizational excellence. To consider that some of those assets are being abused reminds managers of the negative effects on the bottom line. Such pause, duly considered, should help individuals and organizations turn away from the dark side.

A few limitations of the present study restrict the generalizability of the findings. First, the data were cross-sectional, and any inference of cause can only be supported through numerous studies and continuing confirmation of the relationships presented in the model. Second, the nature of the sample may have limited the generalizability of the findings since the majority of respondents were university employees. While an attempt was made to vary the sample characteristics sufficiently to aid generalizability (by using a novel data collection system—the web-based form), the respondents self-selected, hence their background and characteristics could not be controlled. Future research should attempt to draw from as wide a range of participants as possible. Third, while abusive supervision is purported to include verbal and nonverbal elements, this research investigated only the nonverbal influence behaviors associated with the construct. While the measure of abusive behavior in organizations employed in this investigation appeared to be valid and reliable, the construct of abusive supervision seems to be sufficiently broad as to defy easy measurement. Perhaps future research could investigate the construct more fully. Finally, given the sample characteristics, range restriction may have limited variance in the proposed relationships.

As a preliminary model of abusive behavior in organizations, the present research stream shows promise. Certainly, the nature of abusive supervision is a timely and important research topic. This research has attempted to explore the concept in a way that relates antecedents to behaviors to outcomes. Future research should concentrate on expanding and testing the antecedents and moderators of abusive behavior in organizations. Once its causes are known, a better idea of the steps necessary to mitigate its effects may emerge. For practicing managers, abusive supervision can cost the organization substantially, in both monetary and non-monetary terms. The costs of turnover due to the effects of abusive supervision may be a strain on financial resources, and lost productivity while on the job may further inhibit organizational success. In short, abuse, as perceived by employees, does great harm to the organization. Astute managers should do all in their power to understand and minimize the potential for abusive supervision.

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Appendix A

The Abusive Behavior in Organizations (ABO) Scale

Abusive Behaviors

Please use the following scale when responding to the questions below. The source of the actions/events listed should be your supervisor, as in "My supervisor....."

1 = never; 2 = seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; 5 = always

26. ... demeans me.
27. ... humiliates me every chance he/she gets.
28. ... makes me look small in the eyes of my subordinates/peers.

29. ... denies my requests for resources out of spite.
30. ... denies my access to what I need for no good reason.
31. ... keeps me from obtaining what I need to get my job done.
32. ... delays my requests/work products.
33. ... holds up progress in order to make me look bad.
34. ... puts up unnecessary roadblocks in my path.
35. ... lies to me about important things.
36. ... lies to others about me.
37. ... lies to get his/her way.
38. ... physically harms me.
39. ... improperly touches me.