Managerial Abuse and the Process of Absence amongst Mental Health Staff

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MANAGERIAL ABUSE AND THE PROCESS OF ABSENCE AMONG MENTAL HEALTH STAFF

Managers' abuse of subordinates is a common form of unethical behaviour in workplaces. When exposed to such abuse, employees may go absent from work. We propose two possible explanations for employee absence in response to managerial abuse: a sociological explanation based on perceptions of organisational justice and a psychological explanation based on psychological strain. Both are tested using data from a sample of 1,472 mental health workers. The occurrence, duration, and frequency of absence are investigated using a hurdle model. Managerial abuse is found to be associated with the occurrence of absence through both perceptions of organisational justice *and* psychological strain. Distributive justice and depression are especially significant in explaining the relationship between abuse and absence. Once absent, duration of absence is not further affected by managerial abuse but is still linked to depression and distributive justice, whereas frequency of absence is linked to bullying and depression.

Large-scale surveys highlight the unfortunate prevalence of bullying, discrimination and other abusive or offensive behaviour in workplaces (Paoli and Merllié, 2001; Schat et al., 2006). Abuse perpetrated by managers on their subordinates is perhaps the most prevalent unethical behaviour occurring on a daily basis in workplaces (Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2011). Due to the positional power of managers it may differ from abuse by co-workers,

clients or customers, and is more likely to provoke feelings in employees that their values have been violated (Fevre et al., 2012: 228). Employees may respond to managerial abuse in a variety of ways. One reaction is to go absent, a common response to unfair behaviour and stressful work environments (Johns, 2008), but one which may be costly to the individual as well as to the organisation.

The social science approach to absenteeism has been centred on non-physical roots – the social factors behind absenteeism – with the implication that some absence is in a sense voluntary, and not determined by physical illness. Sociologists and industrial relations specialists have typically treated absence as individual conflict and an expression of perceived imbalances in the effort-reward bargain (Baldamus, 1961), which are inherent manifestations of the structural conflict between capital and labour. In the context of 1960's British industrial relations it was commonplace to argue that such individual expressions of conflict were the first stages of a process that escalated into strikes and other collective expressions (Handy, 1968). Abusive supervision would often have been a contributory factor to such concerns about the effort-reward bargain and employees' sense of injustice.

Fevre et al. (2012: 229) place a similar sense of injustice at the centre of their analysis of the abuse and other 'troubles at work', the increasing prominence of which they see as a consequence of the 'transition…from collective to individualised models of employment relations'. However, perhaps reflecting this increasing individualism, the emphasis of much of the discourse on abuse has, Fevre et al. (2012) note, been on characteristics of the individual, and particularly on the victim's stress. This is mirrored in recent empirical research, which has been somewhat dominated by psychologists studying the effects of abuse on victim's well-being (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010a; Tepper, 2000).

Taking a purely psychological approach to understanding managerial abuse deflects attention from the conflict underlying abuse, and particularly from the violation of values and

norms that it represents. However, equally, taking a purely sociological approach neglects the role that mental health might play in people's reactions to abuse. Absenteeism may be a response to stress *and* to perceptions of injustice; as such psychological and sociological approaches may be complementary. More specifically, mental health problems may account for involuntary absence, along with physical health, whereas injustice may account for voluntary absence, which is then a form of resistance. This mirrors De Boer et al.'s (2002) general distinction between two routes to absence from work: strain-induced and withdrawal-based absenteeism. In the study reported in this paper, this distinction is followed as we examine the relative importance of psychological strain and justice perceptions in explaining the link between abuse and absence.

The study is based on the English national survey of staff morale among mental health workers which was conducted in 2009 as part of the National Institute of Health Research's programme. The issue of abuse has been particularly salient in National Health Service (NHS), with claims of institutional failings in this regard (Francis, 2013). At the time of writing (2014), mental health trusts in England employed 190,000 staff members including administrators, which represents about 17 per cent of the total number of NHS employees.

THEORETICAL FOCUS

Managerial abuse refers to subordinates' perceptions of whether their supervisors engage in hostile verbal or non-verbal behaviours towards them (Tepper, 2000), which can include verbal or physical aggression, discrimination, harassment, bullying and lower-level incivilities. Here, the focus is on bullying and discrimination. Managerial bullying refers to the exposure of an employee to negative acts, such as verbal abuse, withholding of information, or being the subject of gossip, from his or her manager. These acts are often recurrent, although one-off incidents of aggression may be interpreted as bullying by the

victim (Lee, 2000). Managerial discrimination refers to the prejudicial treatment of an employee by a manager that is based on the employee's membership of a certain group or category. It ranges from the systematic denial of people's rights on the grounds of their gender, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation or other criteria to more informal verbal abuse that makes reference to such characteristics. While both bullying and discrimination involve the receipt of abusive treatment from another person or persons that may be verbal or non-verbal, they have distinctive elements, most notably that victims of discrimination are targeted specifically because of their group membership (e.g., as being a female or black) and hence the whole collective has been disabused, whereas victims of bullying are apparently targeted as individuals due to personal factors that are not directly attributable to group membership (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010b).

Exposure to each of these forms of abuse from one's manager may result in absenteeism. Certainly, a number of studies have shown an association between abuse and employee absence (e.g. Clausen et al., 2012; Franche et al., 2011; Kivimäki et al., 2000). This evidence suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Managerial abuse is associated with absence from work.

The mechanisms underlying the relationship between abuse and absence are nonetheless poorly understood and two possible explanations are now considered to explain how managerial abuse could lead to absence.

The psychological perspective

The psychological explanation for the link between abuse and absence suggests that employees may be incapable of attending work due to a poor psychological state. Based on stressor-strain theory (Lazarus et al. 1985), it is argued that the receipt of bullying or discrimination is an objective stressor. While an individual may initially reappraise the situation, if this cognitive coping is unsuccessful the individual will experience emotional and

physiological arousal and, in turn, psychological strain. Absence is therefore due to the weakened state of well-being that is precipitated by a stressful event or events; in De Boer et al.'s terms it is involuntary.

A strain-induced explanation implies a mediated chain of effects from managerial abuse through well-being to absence. While the first (e.g., Hershcovis and Barling, 2010a) and last (e.g., Darr and Johns, 2008) parts of this chain are well-established, only one study by Franche et al. (2011) has gone on to explore the full mediation chain, reporting that the effects of violence at work on depression were a route to absence. This study adds to this by testing the following:

> *Hypothesis 2a: The relationship between managerial abuse and absence from work is mediated by psychological strain.*

There are two commonly recognised dimensions of psychological strain – depression and anxiety – and the relative mediating power of each form of strain may vary. Hardy et al. (2003) suggest that depression typically leads to passive, withdrawal behaviours like absenteeism, whereas anxiety, being a more activated state, leads to more active behaviours. Victims suffering from depression may therefore be less likely to actively respond to abuse, or even perceive that they have options, than are victims suffering more from anxiety. Victims suffering from anxiety, in contrast, may respond with retaliation, filing a grievance, or even presenteeism – attending work when unwell – because they worry about the consequences of staying absent (Author 1). This suggests the effect on absenteeism of depression caused by abuse will be greater than that for anxiety.

> *Hypothesis 2b: The mediating effect of depression in the managerial abuse and absence relationship will be greater than that of anxiety.*

The sociological perspective

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While the psychological perspective provides a strain-based (involuntary) explanation of the effect of abuse on absence, the sociological perspective emphasises a withdrawal-based (voluntary) explanation, in which perceptions of (in)justice are the reason that abuse from one's manager leads to absence. In Fevre et al.'s (2012: 61) terms, bullying and discrimination are forms of incivility, which violate 'norms of respect and undermine elements of community in the workplace'. Such violations generate, in Wright Mills's (1970: 14–5) terms, 'personal troubles', which Fevre et al.'s (2012: 61) research shows, can result in employees re-evaluating their relationship with their employer. Given employees' default position is an expectation of being treated fairly and respectfully, this re-evaluation means that victims' evaluations will go beyond reappraising the abuser to a general reassessment of the fairness of the organisation. Thus, in reacting to violations of their individuality, employees' troubling thoughts gravitate to the organisation as a collective entity.

Fevre et al.'s (2012) theory implies this reappraisal will entail a general reappraisal of the two main dimensions of organisational justice, distributive and procedural (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1987). Distributive justice is conceptualised as the fairness associated with decision outcomes and distribution of resources. The outcomes or resources distributed may be tangible (e.g., pay) or intangible (e.g., praise). For example, when workers of the same job are paid different salaries, group members may feel that distributive justice does not exist. Victims of abuse may change their distributive justice perceptions because they view the receipt of managerial abuse as a negative reward which is an unfair exchange for the effort expended in the job or a reduction in the intrinsic rewards of the job. In contrast, procedural justice is defined as the fairness of the processes that resolve disputes and allocate resources. Procedural justice is gauged by how transparent, consistent, accurate, ethical, and unbiased is decision-making and whether people have a voice in this. Victims of abuse may also change their perceptions of procedural justice as they assume the organisation will have effective

procedures in place to ensure its managers behave properly and the organisation fulfils its duty of care to them. Managers' role as guardians and inventors of organisational policies may further reinforce feelings that the organisational procedures are not being followed fairly.

Such changes in perceptions of justice may affect absence for two main reasons. First, when people perceive injustice, they seek to restore justice by reducing effort, including reducing attendance at work (Adams, 1965). Absence is thus an attempt to restore some kind of equality to the effort–reward bargain in the face of a perceived distributional injustice. Second, victims of managerial abuse may feel that going absent when capable of working is an equivalent retaliation or tit-for-tat response to the manager's violation of the organisation's procedures or its incomplete reciprocity for the employee's contribution. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between managerial abuse and absence from work is mediated by justice perceptions.

Absence parameters

Absence is usually operationalised as the total time lost or the total number of separate occasions absent in a specified time period. A binary measure of whether or not the person has been absent during or beyond a particular period is also sometimes used (e.g. Clausen et al., 2012). These operationalisations can be viewed as reflecting the fact that absence is an ongoing process. Over a period of time, there is first the initial step of going absent (i.e. *occurrence*), then staying absent for more than one day (i.e. *duration*), then there is a process of returning to work after a certain length of time, and finally either being present for the rest of the period or going absent again (i.e. *frequency*). In this study, we investigate whether managerial abuse has varying effects across the different absence parameters and whether potential mechanisms in terms of the psychological strain and organisational justice explanations are differentially linked to each absence parameter.

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THE STUDY

The study is based on a survey that was conducted in 100 wards and 38 outpatient-based service teams within 19 mental health trusts, each delivering a broad range of mental health services to a catchment area drawn from the regions surrounding the four universities involved in the study: London and the South-East, South Yorkshire and Derbyshire, Bristol and the South-west and Warwickshire and West Midlands. Trusts varied in size, demographics and geographical characteristics and included urban and rural settings. Having selected these areas, all Trusts in the regions were approached and participated in the study and employees within all units of each were included in the study.

The sample of mental health staff working in psychiatric wards or community mental health teams covers all occupational groups, full- and part-time workers and qualified and unqualified workers. The health workforce is particularly appropriate for studying managerial abuse because it is highly mixed in terms of gender, ethnicity and age. Also, various forms of abuse including bullying and discrimination are thought to be more prevalent in mental health settings than in most other employment settings (Carter, et. al, 2012; Healthcare Commission, 2006). Concerns about ensuring the well-being of staff and patients are particularly salient in the health sector more generally, and are typically expressed in the induction, supervision and appraisal of staff.

All Trusts have formal policies on abuse and absenteeism. The abuse policy is typically labelled as the 'Bullying and Discrimination policy and procedure', and includes definitions and examples of situations that constitute these. It is designed to 'provide proper redress for individuals facing discrimination and bullying and to assist in identifying and dealing with these issues' (Trust X's policy statement) in line with the NHS's policy of valuing diversity. The expectation is that all employees will demonstrate 'at all times behaviours that are

commensurate with the values and principle of the Trust' (Trust X's policy statement), and comply with the policy. Disciplinary action, which may include dismissal, could be taken against people found to be perpetrators of abuse. This article's focus on bullying and discrimination, and the use of these terms in the study was partly guided by the existence of such policies and the way they were framed. The terms are also used in the NHS annual staff survey, and this influenced our phrasing of the abuse questions. The use in policies and the staff survey of such terms also added to our confidence that they would be readily understood. The absence policy in Trusts was a trigger system which meant that after certain numbers of periods of absence actions were expected to be taken. It was aimed at supporting the staff rather than having a punitive orientation, although dismissal remained a potential (albeit rare) end point to persistent absence.

A questionnaire was distributed to all workers within the 138 health service units. Out of a total of 3,545 people who received the questionnaire, 2,258 people responded, an overall response rate of 63.7%. The number of responses from each health service unit varied from 4 to 40, with a mean of 13 employees (response rates ranged from 22% to 100% with a median rate of 62.3%). The ethical procedures for doing research in the NHS meant it was not possible to collect or receive information on staff before they had consented to participating in the study, meaning that the representativeness of either the initial sample or of the respondents relative to the non-respondents cannot be determined.

Of the 2,258 people who responded to the questionnaire, ward managers and team managers in the community setting were excluded from this study as the survey focused on experiences of abuse from one's manager. Also excluded were those working less than two hours a week, and 27 people that were absent more than 120 working days a year and/or more than 12 time periods on the grounds that such chronic absence was more likely to be due to

idiosyncratic or health reasons. In addition, 216 further participants were excluded as they provided no data on any of the measures used in this study.

Of the 1,833 remaining individuals: 25 had missing values on three or more measures, 56 on two measures, and 280 on just one of the 16 measures in the study. Missingness is however 0% for the absence measures, and at most 2.5% for all but one of the control variables (being 10% for social support). Exploratory analyses did not show systematic missingness patterns, so a complete case analysis seems warranted. Out of the resulting working sample of 1,472 complete cases, 64% were female, 76% were white Caucasian, and 75% were nurses. The mean age was 40 years with a standard deviation of 11 years.

Measures

Managerial Abuse: bullying and discrimination from managers. Because bullying and discrimination by managers are singular concrete behavioural attributes, single-item measures were used (as in Hershcovis et al., 2010). This also has the practical advantage of reducing the cognitive and temporal load on participants by avoiding the need to complete lengthy scales. The bullying measure was based on asking: 'Do you believe that you have experienced any bullying from a manager at work in the past 12 months?' The response categories were yes (=1) and no (=0). Discrimination from managers was measured by asking respondents: 'Do you believe that you have experienced any form of discrimination from a manager at work in the past 12 months?' Again, the response categories were yes and no.

Psychological Strain. Six items from Warr's (1990) well-being measures were used to assess anxiety and depression. Respondents were asked: 'Thinking of the past few weeks, how much of the time has your job made you feel' each of six negative states: for anxiety – tense, uneasy and worried ($\alpha = 0.78$); for depression – miserable, depressed and gloomy ($\alpha = 0.72$). Responses ranged from 'never' (1) to 'all of the time' (5).

Organisational Justice. Perceptions of procedural and distributive justice were measured using two scales developed by Niehoff and Moorman (1993); for procedural justice $\alpha = 0.91$ and distributive justice $\alpha = 0.91$. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed on a five-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' with statements such as 'All decisions that affect jobs are applied consistently across all affected employees' (see Appendix for the full list of items).

Absenteeism. The information on absenteeism is based on individuals' self-reported sickness absence, as absence records are treated as confidential by Health Trusts in the UK, though a strong correlation between self-reported and objectively recorded absence has previously been found (Gaudine and Gregory, 2010; Johns, 1994). Respondents were asked, "Approximately how many days off sick have you had in the past year" (the total number of times absence) and "over approximately how many separate episodes of illness?" (the frequency of absence).

Control Variables. Four demographic variables were included: age, gender, ethnic origin and occupational group. These were included as they have been found in some studies to be related to well-being or absence (Warr, 2007: 281–326; Hicks, 2013). In addition, the following job characteristics known to affect well-being and absence (Van Der Dorf and Maes, 1999) were controlled for: total hours worked per week (as a proportion of the regular 38-hour week), job demands ($\alpha = 0.91$), control ($\alpha = 0.89$) and support ($\alpha = 0.76$), the last three based on Haynes et al.'s (1999) measures.

Data Analysis

A two-part hurdle count regression model is used to model the data because both the absenteeism outcomes are skewed right-tailed count measures with disproportionally high zero-frequency. The hurdle model reflects the process model of absence. Duration and frequency are both conditional on being absent in the first place; if one were never absent

over the entire time span, the total duration of absence and the frequency of absence would be zero. Our approach treats absence as a hurdle phenomenon with two parts. In the first stage the mere occurrence is modelled and in the second stage the duration and frequency of absence is modelled given that absence occurred. This means that it is possible to assess whether the same mechanisms play a role at both stages, which may not be the case as what determines whether you jump does not necessarily determine how far you get if you do jump. Although the individual-level data we collected are embedded in wards or community care centres, diagnostics to see whether multilevel analysis was required revealed it was not necessary; there was a small amount of clustering and low intra-class correlations.

RESULTS

In the sample of 1,472 mental health workers, the mean number of days absent in a year is 8.35, with a large standard deviation of 14.35 and a median of 4 days absent. Hence the distribution of days absent is skewed with a long right tail. The mean number of time periods absent is 1.75, with a standard deviation of 1.56 and a median of 2. About 23% of the workers reported not been absent at all, resulting in a zero-inflated distribution of both absence outcomes. The incidence of managerial abuse was 21% for bullying and 8% for discrimination. Overall, 86% of victims of one or both types of managerial abuse reported being absent (i.e. occurrence), with a mean duration of 11 days (median = 5) and mean frequency of 2.2 times (median = 2), whereas 74% of those who did not report either type of abuse reported being absent, with a mean duration of 8 days (median = 3) and mean frequency of 1.6 times (median = 1).

Means, standard deviations and Pearson linear correlations for the variables under study are presented in Table 1. Variables within each conceptual block are moderately correlated, from 0.35 for the two managerial abuse measures to 0.65 for the psychological strain

measures. The number of days and number of times absent have a correlation of 0.33, and a Spearman rank correlation of 0.77 indicating a high correspondence in relative rankings. Managerial abuse measures correlate positively with both psychological strain measures (i.e. anxiety and depression) and negatively with both organisational justice measures (i.e. distributive and procedural justice). The strain/organisational justice measures are correlated positively/negatively with both absence measures.

Managerial Abuse and Absence

The two-stage approach to examining associations between abuse and absence involved constructing five models that differed in the sets of predictor variables included. In Model 1, absence is predicted based on the control variables, demographic and job characteristics. In Model 2, Hypothesis 1 is tested, adding managerial bullying and discrimination as possible predictors of absence. This second model examines the impact of managerial abuse over and above demographic and job characteristics (model comparison 1 versus 2), and the estimated regression coefficients are treated as indicators of the total effect of managerial abuse on absence in the study. In Model 3, psychological strain is added to the model. This model provides the initial step towards testing Hypothesis 2, examining whether depression and anxiety are significant predictors of absence, and allows the mediating role of these psychological predictor variables to be assessed. In Model 4, psychological strain is replaced by the organisational justice predictors. This model provides the initial step towards testing Hypothesis 3, and allows the mediating role of these sociological predictor variables to be assessed. Finally, in Model 5, both strain and justice variables are added into the model to examine absence from a dual psychological and sociological perspective.

The five models are constructed for both stages of the hurdle and hence for occurrence, and post-hurdle for duration and frequency of absence. The results of these models are presented in Table 2. The regression coefficients β_{model} (subscript indicates the corresponding model)

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represent the change in response of a one-unit difference in the corresponding predictor, keeping the value of the other predictors constant, with those significantly different from zero at the 5 percent level in bold. The responses are respectively the expected (natural) log odds of absence occurrence for the whole sample (logistic regression) and the expected (natural) logged count of duration/frequency for those who reported being absent (count regression). For both binary and count outcomes the expected value is directly proportional to the expected variance around this value. In the negative binomial count regression model for duration, this proportionality restriction is relaxed by adding what is called a dispersion parameter that allows data to be more or less variable than expected under a regular Poisson count model (default dispersion = 1). To enable an effect- size interpretation, 95% confidence intervals have been included in Model 5 for $exp(\beta_5)$, which gives, for occurrence, the multiplicative change in odds of being absent versus being not-absent, and for duration and frequency, the multiplicative change in incidence rate of absence days/occasions. Thus, for instance, the odds of being absent versus not-absent multiplies by a factor of approximately 2 (95%CI [1.48, 2.40]) for each point difference on the depression scale, keeping the values of other predictors constant. At the bottom of Table 2, the negative loglikelihood of each model is reported, with smaller values indicating a better fit to the data. Models for the same absence parameter with an equal number of regression coefficients can be directly compared, whereas models that are nested in each other can be compared through the likelihood ratio test (LRT) under the null hypothesis that the smaller nested model fits equally as well as the larger model. A significant result means the extra predictors in the larger model have additional predictive value. For reference purposes, a comparison to a baseline model without any predictors (Model 0) is included.

A summary of the results of a bootstrap analysis for the mediation Hypotheses 2 and 3 is given in Table 3. The indirect effects are expressed as a percentage of the total effect of

managerial abuse in Model 2 (second column) that is accounted for by the inclusion of psychological strain (Model 3), organisational justice (Model 4), or both strain and justice (Model 5). To show the progression of the remaining direct effects of managerial abuse across models, 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals for these direct effects are displayed on the left of the indirect effect percentages in each model column. Effects that do not contain 0 in their confidence interval are in bold.

   Total effects of abuse on absence. The Model 2 results in Table 2 indicate the total effect of managerial abuse on absence without accounting for strain or justice. Both managerial bullying and discrimination are associated with an increasing chance of having reported an absence. For those health workers that reported experiencing both forms of managerial abuse, the odds of being absent versus not-absent is 3.49 times higher (exp(0.46+0.79)) compared to those that experienced no managerial abuse. The model comparison shows Model 2 fits significantly better than Model 1 for absence occurrence which further supports the impact of managerial abuse. Hence, these results support Hypothesis 1, indicating that managerial abuse is linked to absenteeism. However, the conclusion needs to be qualified, because once absent, (i.e. at stage 2: after passing the initial hurdle of absence occurrence), neither form of abuse is further associated with the duration of absence and only bullying is associated with a higher frequency of absence.

   Indirect effects of abuse via psychological strain. Model 3 results from Table 2 indicate what happens when the psychological strain variables of anxiety and depression are added. Model 3 fits significantly better than Model 2 for all absence parameters. Moreover, whereas both bullying and discrimination were significant predictors in Model 2, when strain is added in Model 3 neither form of abuse is a significant predictor. Instead, depression (but not anxiety) emerges as a significant predictor of absence occurrence. This provides preliminary support for a mediated effect, consistent with the idea of strain-induced absenteeism.

The mediation Hypothesis 2a is supported directly in the results presented in Table 3, which shows that 30% of the total effect of managerial abuse on occurrence of absence is accounted for by psychological strain. In particular, 39% of the effect of bullying and 23% of the effect of discrimination is explained by strain. Furthermore, the indirect effect of managerial abuse on absence occurrence through depression is stronger than that through anxiety (Δ(Anx,Dep) = [-.12, -.04]), which provides support for Hypothesis 2b. Once absent, depression increases the incidence of total duration and frequency of absence occasions, but does not explain the effect of managerial bullying on the frequency parameter.

Indirect effects of abuse via organisational justice perceptions. Model 4 results from Table 2 indicate what happens when the distributive and procedural justice variables are added to Model 2. Model 4 fits significantly better than Model 2 for all absence parameters. Perceptions of procedural and distributive justice are both negatively related to absence occurrence. Moreover, while both bullying and discrimination are significant predictors in Model 2, when justice is added to Model 4, only discrimination (and not bullying) emerges as a significant predictor. There is therefore some preliminary support for a mediated effect of bullying through justice perceptions, consistent with the idea of voluntary absenteeism.

Results presented in Table 3 provide further support for Hypothesis 3, with 15% of the total effect of managerial abuse on occurrence of absence accounted for by justice perceptions. More specifically, 24% of the effect of bullying on absence is explained by justice although it explains just 7% of the effect of discrimination. Once absent, perceptions of distributive justice (but not procedural justice) were associated with shorter total absence duration, but organisational justice perceptions were not linked to frequency of absence, and hence did not explain the effect of bullying on absence frequency.

Strain versus justice versus both? A comparison of the proportion of total effects of abuse on absence occurrence explained by the strain versus justice mediators (Models 3 and 4 in

Table 3) suggests that the psychological-strain account of the abuse-absence relationship may be more important than the justice account. However, the model comparisons at the bottom of Table 2 show that a model that combines the strain and justice explanations (Model 5) fits significantly better than either explanation alone for two absence parameters, although the strain model (Model 3) accounts for the effects of absence frequency just as well as the combined model. The two mediators together in particular explain a higher proportion of the total effects of managerial abuse (40%) on absence occurrence than each of the strain (30%) or justice accounts (15%). Yet the combined direct effect of managerial abuse (i.e. the sum of bullying and discrimination) on absence occurrence is still significant when both strain and justice explanations are accounted for, which means that other factors, such as workers' physical health and caring responsibilities, may be influencing the abuse–absence relationship.

Effects of control variables on absence. Considering the demographic characteristics, the odds for absence occurrence are slightly higher for mental health workers who are female and are younger. Yet once absent, older age is associated with longer absence duration and nurses have a higher frequency of absence than non-nurses (the latter can be explained to some extent by nurses having a higher level of depression). Of the job characteristics, higher work demands are associated with an increased occurrence of absence and, once absent, higher job autonomy is associated with shorter duration of absence.

DISCUSSION

This article contrasts two potential explanations of why abuse at work may cause employees to be absent, one sociological, the other psychological. Using data from a large sample of mental health workers in England, a link between managerial abuse and absenteeism with a medium effect-size was found. For those health workers experiencing both forms of

managerial abuse, the odds of being absent were 3.49 times higher than for those that experienced no managerial abuse. It was found that occurrence of absence in response to abuse is partly explained by its impact on perceptions of organisational justice, as in the sociological perspective, and partly by its impact on psychological strain, as in the psychological perspective. Overall, 40 per cent of the effect of abuse on absence can be explained by organisational justice perceptions and psychological strain, and particularly by the experience of depression and perceptions of distributive injustice.

Managerial abuse triggers both strain-induced and withdrawal-induced absenteeism. People are absent following abuse because they cannot attend work *and* because they are unwilling to attend. Thus, psychological and sociological explanations complement each other. If one solely adopts the psychological approach one neglects the notion that absence can be a means of resistance; equally if one focuses on the sociological, one neglects the way abuse may have devastating effects on the mental health of victims.

Our analysis of the psychological explanation of the abuse-absence relationship revealed that depression plays a more central role than anxiety, which supports our initial hypothesis that more passive forms of strain are more strongly linked to absence. This illustrates the value of differentiating strain, which in this case is based on the circumplex theory of affect (Warr, 2007). We likewise found that distributive justice had a stronger impact than procedural justice as a mediator of the abuse–absence relationship and as a predictor of the duration of absence. Thus, victims of abuse appear to be more concerned about the abuser's violations of their right to a trouble-free job than violations of organisational procedures per se. That the unfairness of abuse does not arise directly from unfair organisation's procedures may contribute to the more limited role of procedural justice.

The differing results we observed across the absence parameters reinforce the point that they collectively represent a process and supports the strength of examining each as distinct

outcomes. In particular, while there was a clear relationship between experience of abuse from one's manager and occurrence of absence, the total duration of absence was not related to either type of managerial abuse. This implies that among those that went absent, those whose absence is associated with managerial bullying or discrimination are not systematically staying away from work for longer or shorter periods than those who went absent but did not experience managerial bullying. Moreover, frequency of absence was related only to bullying, but not to discrimination and, unlike occurrence of absence, neither justice perceptions nor strain could explain this relationship. However, keeping managerial abuse constant, depression did significantly affect frequency of absence, suggesting that the number of times an individual is absent is an indicator of strain rather than resistance. Nonetheless, that distributive justice has an impact on absence duration independent of abuse reinforces the need to overcome its neglect in the absence literature, as previously noted by Johns (2008).

The key difference in the findings for the two kinds of managerial abuse was that bullying directly affected the recurrence of absence whereas discrimination did not. This may reflect the fact that bullying is often a repeated behaviour, or alternatively that victims of bullying return to work before they have properly recovered, perhaps in the expectation that a longer period of absence would lead to more bullying. In contrast, discrimination may be a one-off occurrence or be such an institutionalised process that it does not have such enduring effects on absence. In addition to this difference, the associations between bullying and occurrence of absence were more fully explained by both strain and injustice than were the associations between discrimination and occurrence of absence, suggesting that the personal nature of bullying may heighten the severity of the strain and sense of personal injustice about how one is rewarded and treated (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010b).

The research design has enabled a strong picture of the abuse-absence relationship to be provided and certainly adds to the evidence-base on abuse in the NHS, but may have some

limitations. First, the measures of managerial abuse are based on single-item measures of its occurrence that do not provide information on the frequency or severity of the abuse. While such measures have the advantage that they capture people's own perceptions of whether they have been bullied or discriminated, future work might include questions about the frequency and intensity of the abuse or perhaps the exploration of specific instances as in the critical incident method. An assessment of the effect of policies on self-definitions of abuse might also be an interesting methodological exercise since the existence of abuse policies and their highly publicised nature in the NHS might have made employees more prone to label behaviours from others as being 'bullying' or 'discrimination'.

Second, the study is based on a cross-sectional design. While we hypothesised a causal chain such that abuse leads to absence via mechanisms of mental strain and perceived injustice, other processes cannot be ruled out. For instance, it is possible that people who are often absent or show feelings of depression are more likely to be targeted for abuse. Similarly, people with strong feelings of distributive injustice may be more resistant and engage in oppositional politics which may elicit abuse from managers. To capture such potential multi-directional processes, future research should include a temporal dimension that yields longitudinal intensive data.

Third, though the theory is likely to be generaliseable to other sectors of the economy, the study is in only one context. The finding that absence is related to age and being female has been found in other studies, but the nurse effect on frequency is situationally specific, though it may be mirrored in occupations that involve similar shift work or regular close (physical and psychological) contact with distressed or disabled clients or customers. Nonetheless studies in other organisational and occupational settings are needed. If these covered multiple contexts, moderator variables could include types of organisational policies on absence and abuse, and how salient they are to employees. Future research could consider other potential

confounding variables, such as physical health, as well as other outcomes like quit rates and lateness. Abuse may come from sources other than managers – co-workers, patients and visitors in mental health settings – and thus research could test the psychological and sociological explanations for abuse from these other sources.

CONCLUSION

The key finding of this study is that bullying and discrimination from managers results in absenteeism because people's levels of depression and perceptions of distributive injustice are affected, and hence so is their ability and their willingness to attend work. Once absent, the duration of time away from work is not systematically longer or shorter than for somebody who is not abused, whereas the frequency of absence is greater for those who are bullied and for those with higher levels of depression. As Fevre et al. (2012) highlight there is a moral dimension to reactions to being abused. Individuals, when sensing that their abuser have violated them, are judging that their abuser both could *and* should have behaved differently. This generates a feeling that this abuse reflects on the employing organisation. Equally, however, there is an emotional and mental health dimension because the abuse threatens people's well-being and generates unwanted strain.

The findings suggest that NHS policies on abuse and absence at the time of the study were not robust enough to curtail either abuse or absence as a response to this. The persistence of abuse when organisations publicise such policies may in fact reinforce any feelings that employees may have that the organisation is to blame for their psychological state as mistreatment from managers indicates that policies to prevent abuse are not working. Including third-party mediation in grievance procedures may help to reduce the length and recurrence of absence, but probably only if these procedures produce potentially favourable results for employees, and this is hard to achieve if there is a clear inequality in the mediation parties' status as there is when the abuser is the victim's superior.

The Francis (2013) report into failings in the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust highlighted bullying and, more significantly, that some of this was directed at people raising concerns about practices and patient or staff safety. A subsequent report on the Freedom to Speak Up in the Francis's NHS review centred on the importance of ensuring that whistleblowers are not fearful of recrimination in the form of bullying (Francis, 2015). Developing cultures that encourage informal and formal complaints may reduce bullying and increase people's confidence to expose it rather than, for example, taking sick leave, but the prevention of abuse, as both of Francis's reports acknowledge, may need to be addressed directly through selection processes, training, appraisal and role-modelling. Values-based recruitment is now mandatory within the NHS and is a direct result of the Francis recommendations. The ethical issues considered in the framing of the principles guiding such personnel practices, both in and beyond the NHS, must be as full as possible and involve all employees in their identification.

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Author 1

APPENDIX: Distributive and Procedural Organisational Justice scales

Distributive Justice

1. My work schedule is fair

2. I think my level of pay is fair

3. I consider my workload to be fair

4. Overall the rewards I receive here are fair

Procedural Justice

1. Decisions that affect my job are made by Senior Trust management in an unbiased manner

2. Senior Trust management makes sure all employees' concerns are heard before making decisions that affect my job

3. In making decisions that affect my job, Senior Trust management collect accurate and complete information

4. Senior Trust management clarify decisions and provide additional information when requested by employees

5. All decisions that affect jobs are applied consistently across all affected employees

6. Employees are allowed to challenge or appeal decisions made by Senior Trust management

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.*

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	Total Hours	1															
2	Work Demands	.09	1														
3	Job Control	-.02	-.12	1													
4	Support	-.02	-.19	.28	1												
5	Age	-.09	.08	.10	.06	1											
6	Gender	.14	-.01	.00	.03	.11	1										
7	Ethnicity	.08	-.12	.00	.07	-.05	.16	1									
8	Occupation	.02	.06	.30	.04	.04	-.05	-.07	1								
9	Bullying	.10	.21	-.18	-.20	.03	-.01	.11	-.07	1							
10	Discrimination	.06	.16	-.15	-.23	.04	.03	.07	-.04	.35	1						
11	Anxiety	.01	.43	-.22	-.19	.01	-.01	-.02	-.04	.24	.23	1					
12	Depression	.02	.38	-.31	-.29	.01	-.01	-.01	-.11	.30	.26	.65	1				
13	Distributive Justice	-.10	-.46	.37	.30	.06	.00	-.02	.19	-.24	-.17	-.32	-.39	1			
14	Procedural Justice	-.04	-.39	.18	.28	-.01	.01	.20	-.01	-.23	-.18	-.33	-.35	.43	1		
15	Total days absent	-.02	.09	-.12	-.05	.03	-.03	-.05	-.03	.06	.09	.12	.20	-.16	-.10	1	
16	Total times absent	-.01	.11	-.12	-.09	-.12	-.05	.00	-.08	.16	.10	.16	.25	-.19	-.16	.33	1
n = 1472 **M**		1.05	2.76	3.15	3.31	39.92	.36	.24	.25	.21	.08	2.52	2.06	3.00	2.50	8.35	1.75
SD		.27	1.01	.87	.92	10.66	.48	.43	.43	.41	.27	.75	.85	.79	.81	14.35	1.56

Note. Correlations in absolute value above .05, .07, and .09 are significant at level .05, .01, and .001, respectively. However, comparison and evaluation in terms of absolute correlation values is ill advised given the different distributional types of the variables (6-10 binary, 15-16 counts, other interval).

Coding of categorical variables: Gender (female = 0, male = 1), ethnicity (white = 0, non-white = 1, the latter comprising Asian, African, Caribbean and mixed or other ethnic groups), and occupation (nurse = 0, non-nurse = 1, the latter comprising social workers, occupational therapists, psychiatrists, and clinical psychologists).

Table 2. *Hurdle analysis of the absence data in terms of occurrence (i.e., the initial hurdle), duration, and frequency (i.e., beyond the hurdle).*

	Absence	Hurdle Occurrence						After the hurdle Duration|Occurrence						After the hurdle Frequency|Occurrence					
	Model	1	2	3	4	5	5	1	2	3	4	5	5	1	2	3	4	5	5
	Regression Coefficient	β_1	β_2	β_3	β_4	β_5	95%CI: exp(β_5)	β_1	β_2	β_3	β_4	β_5	95%CI: exp(β_5)	β_1	β_2	β_3	β_4	β_5	95%CI: exp(β_5)
1	Intercept	**1.39**	**1.26**	**1.36**	**1.29**	**1.37**	**[3.11, 4.86]**	**2.31**	**2.29**	**2.28**	**2.27**	**2.26**	**[8.33, 11.21]**	**.25**	**.19**	**.18**	**.18**	**.17**	[1.08, 1.31]
2	Total Hours	-.39	-.45	-.41	-.50	-.46	[.38, 1.05]	-.13	-.13	-.12	-.19	-.17	[.61, 1.14]	.02	-.02	.00	-.04	-.01	[.78, 1.25]
3	Work Demands	**.27**	**.22**	.08	.06	-.04	[.82, 1.12]	.08	.07	.01	.00	-.05	[.86, 1.05]	.06	.04	.00	.00	-.02	[.91, 1.05]
4	Job Control	-.10	-.06	.04	.03	.11	[.93, 1.33]	**-.20**	**-.19**	**-.14**	**-.14**	-.10	[.81, 1.01]	-.07	-.06	-.03	-.04	-.01	[.91, 1.07]
5	Support	-.13	-.07	.00	.01	.06	[.90, 1.25]	.02	.04	.05	.09	.10	[.99, 1.23]	-.03	-.01	.01	.02	.03	[.95, 1.11]
6	Age	**-.02**	**-.02**	**-.02**	**-.02**	**-.02**	**[.97, .99]**	**.01**	**.01**	**.01**	**.01**	**.01**	[1.00, 1.02]	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.01	[.98, 1.00]
7	Gender	**-.32**	**-.31**	**-.29**	**-.30**	**-.29**	**[.57, .99]**	-.05	-.05	-.05	-.06	-.05	[.78, 1.15]	-.01	.00	.00	.00	.00	[.86, 1.15]
8	Ethnicity	.10	.02	-.01	.06	.03	[.74, 1.45]	-.14	-.17	-.16	-.19	-.19	[.64, 1.04]	.02	-.02	-.01	.00	.00	[.85, 1.17]
9	Occupation	-.12	-.10	-.03	-.03	.03	[.76, 1.43]	-.05	-.05	-.06	.02	.01	[.80, 1.29]	**-.20**	**-.18**	**-.17**	**-.17**	-.15	[.72, 1.02]
10	Bullying		**.46**	.29	.35	.23	[.87, 1.86]		.02	-.04	.00	-.05	[.75, 1.16]		**.25**	**.20**	**.22**	**.18**	**[1.03, 1.40]**
11	Discrimination		**.79**	.63	**.75**	.59	[.94, 4.26]		.22	.13	.21	.13	[.80, 1.57]		.03	-.03	.02	-.02	[.78, 1.20]
12	Anxiety			-.04		-.06	[.75, 1.19]			-.08		-.07	[.79, 1.09]			-.01		-.02	[.88, 1.10]
13	Depression			**.68**		**.63**	**[1.48, 2.40]**			**.29**		**.28**	**[1.14, 1.53]**			**.18**		**.16**	**[1.06, 1.30]**
14	Distributive Justice				**-.35**	**-.30**	**[.59, .94]**				**-.25**	**-.25**	**[.67, .91]**				-.09	-.07	[.84, 1.04]
15	Procedural Justice				-.25	-.19	[.68, 1.00]				.01	.04	[.92, 1.17]				-.06	-.04	[.87, 1.06]
	Dispersion	1	1	1	1	1		**.72**	**.72**	**.74**	**.74**	**.75**		1	1	1	1	1	
	-LogLikelihood	768	760	737	747	729		3723	3723	3710	3713	3701		1750	1742	1731	1737	1728	

Model Comparison	LRT	df	p		LRT	df	p		LRT	df	p
Model1 vs Model0	48	8	<.001		45	8	<.001		47	8	<.001
Model2 vs Model1	16	2	<.001		3	2	.210		17	2	<.001
Model3 vs Model2	46	2	<.001		24	2	<.001		23	2	<.001
Model4 vs Model2	24	2	<.001		18	2	<.001		9	2	.009
Model5 vs Model3	15	2	.001		17	2	<.001		5	2	.083
Model5 vs Model4	37	2	<.001		23	2	<.001		18	2	<.001

Note. Logistic regression for Occurrence; Negative binomial regression for Duration; Poisson regression for Frequency. Intercept indicates expected log odds or baseline logged incidence rate for a white female nurse not experiencing managerial abuse with average scores on the other predictors.

Table 3. *Mediation analysis: Decomposition of standardized effects of managerial abuse on absence occurrence through psychological strain and organisational justice.*

	Model 2 None	**Model 3** Psychological strain		**Model 4** Organisational justice		**Model 5** Strain and justice		
Mediator								
Source \ Effect	Total	Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect	Indirect
Bullying	**[.02, .18]**	[-.01, .14]	**39%**	[.00, .16]	**24%**	[-.03, .13]	**52%**	**[.03, .08]**
Discrimination	**[.02, .23]**	[-.00, .20]	**23%**	**[.02, .22]**	7%	[-.01, .19]	**29%**	**[.01, .06]**
Managerial abuse	**[.10, .33]**	**[.04, .27]**	30%	**[.07, .30]**	15%	**[.02, .25]**	40%	**[.05, .12]**

Note. To allow comparison across models, logistic regression coefficients were standardised according to

$$\beta_X^Z = \beta_X \frac{SD_X}{\sqrt{\beta S \beta + \frac{\pi^2}{3}}}.$$ Bias-corrected bootstrap 95% confidence intervals are reported. Managerial abuse is sum of bullying and discrimination.