

Young workers' experiences of abusive leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to develop a model of abusive leadership as experienced by young workers. Abusive leadership is understood to be subjective and as such this research seeks to explore the experience of abusive leadership through a qualitative approach.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on interviews with 30 young workers who identified themselves as having a “bad” boss, this study employs a constructivist grounded theory approach in order to identify behaviours, moderators and outcomes of abusive leadership.

Findings – A definition and model of abusive leadership as experienced by young workers is proposed. The model details 11 behaviours, five moderators and six individual and two organizational outcomes of abusive leadership.

Originality/value – The adoption of a constructivist grounded theory approach reveals several unique factors that moderate the relationship between behaviors and outcomes of abusive leadership in young workers. By grounding the model in the actual experiences of young workers, the paper offers possibilities for future research on abusive leadership and young workers and across demographic groups.

Introduction

Kets de Vries (2006) provocatively argued that all leaders, those of organizations, countries or communities, are susceptible to the darker side of power. To date, however, there is only a limited body of research that has examined the “dark” side of leadership and workplace outcomes (Bassman and London, 1993; Tepper, 2000; Tierney and Tepper, 2007). In order to better understand “abusive leadership” and its impact on an important and often overlooked demographic group of workers, that is, young workers (Loughlin and Barling, 2001), our research sets out to develop a model of abusive leadership as experienced by young workers.

Tepper (2007) argued that studies on abusive leadership are not well grounded in theory although a set of antecedents and consequences is beginning to emerge from the literature. Most studies have used existing research in other areas (e.g. interpersonal justice, workplace bullying) as starting points for exploring abusive leadership. Undoubtedly, it is important to transfer insights from well-studied areas of research to new and developing areas of research. At the same, we argue that exploratory research may reveal aspects unique to this area of study that would otherwise go overlooked. Abusive leadership is subjective in that it is based on the perceptions of the target (Tepper, 2000; Keashly, 2001) and we propose that researchers need to examine to the stories of those experiencing abusive leadership to better understand the term, behaviours and outcomes of it. As such, we adopt a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) to help us do this. We take as a starting point Kellerman's (2004) argument that the term “leadership” encompasses both bad and good leadership. Rather than refer to the dark side of leadership as something other than leadership (Kellerman, 2004), we use the term “abusive leadership” throughout this paper.

In developing a model abusive leadership as experienced by young workers our research objectives are: to determine a definition of abusive leadership; to identify the behaviours associated with abusive leadership; and to identify the individual and organizational outcomes associated with abusive leadership. We begin by presenting a brief literature review of abusive leadership, followed by a discussion of our research design. We then present the findings of our research organized around the behaviours, moderators and outcomes of abusive leadership. Our discussion section begins with our definition of abusive leadership and then highlights the uniqueness of our findings in relation to the extant literature. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the limitations and practical implications of this research.

Literature review

The role of the literature review is a contentious issue for grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2006; Cutcliffe, 2000). Classical grounded theories argue that researchers should not engage in a detailed literature review before proceeding with data collection (Cutcliffe, 2000; The Grounded Theory Institute, 2009). They argue that the literature review frames the data collection and analyses processes to such an extent that it hinders the researcher's ability to be unbiased. Interestingly, it was the initial literature review that led us to the conclusion that a contribution could be made if our model was grounded in the experiences of young workers, rather than assuming that the experiences of young workers simply reflected the existing literature. This brief literature review provides an overview of the research on abusive leadership and the key conclusions that influenced our decision to adopt a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

Despite the growing literature on various forms of abuse within organizations in Europe (e.g. Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Hoel et al., 1999) and North America (e.g. Baron and Neuman, 1998; Keashly et al., 1994), abusive leadership remains a topic that has not been systematically researched or even widely explored (Tepper, 2007). Studies have used an assortment of terms to describe abusive leadership such as petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994, 1997), abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007), workplace bullying (Hoel and Cooper, 2001), workplace aggression (Baron and Neuman, 1998; Schat and Kelloway, 2000), leader bullying (Ferris et al., 2007), narcissist leadership (Kets de Vries, 2004; Kets de Vries and Miller, 1985), bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004), destructive leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007; Padilla et al., 2007), emotional abuse (Keashly, 1998), perceived leader integrity (Craig and Gustafson, 1998), toxic leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) and supervisor undermining (Duffy et al., 2002). There is no consensus on one name and one definition, making the research hard to generalize from study to study.

Ashforth (1994, 1997) characterized petty tyranny as a manager's use of power and authority oppressively, capriciously, and vindictively. He developed six dimensions of a petty tyrant:

- (1) acts in an arbitrary and self-aggrandizing manner;
- (2) belittles subordinates;
- (3) has a lack of consideration for others;
- (4) forces conflict resolution;
- (5) discourages initiative; and
- (6) uses non-contingent punishment.

These six dimensions were developed by asking 562 business students to rate their current or most recent manager based on an 89-item scale that was derived from existing leadership scales and from an earlier sample of business students. The earlier sample of business students was asked to describe incidents with a manager who had "lorded his or her power." Despite the contribution of Ashforth's work, we contend that lording one's power represents a somewhat narrow range of behaviours associated with abusive leaders. Further, in order to access rich and exhaustive descriptions of abusive leaders we argue that there is a need for more qualitative research.

Keashly (2001) adopted a qualitative research approach to explore emotional abuse at work. Relative power differential and the organization's response to individual concerns of feeling abused emerged as significant themes for the participants in her study. Keashly (2001) concluded that abusive behaviours were those that were repeated, perceived as inconsiderate of an individual's integrity and resulted in harm or injury to the target. Overall, intent to harm was not salient in her findings. Baron and Neuman (1998) investigated a similar concept called workplace aggression, defined as those behaviours intended to harm others with whom an individual presently or previously worked. Unlike Keashly (2001), Baron and Neuman (1998) placed particular emphasis on the aggressor's intent to harm. Research design differences may explain these mixed findings about intent and abusive leadership. For example, Baron and Neuman (1998) asked participants to consider intent as a key dimension of workplace aggression, while Keashly (2001) simply asked individuals to talk about their experiences of "feeling abused". These differences in research design and findings highlight the need for additional research that allows individuals to talk about experiences of abusive leadership in their own words, rather than imposing a priori conceptions on participants.

Duffy et al. (2002) described social undermining as behaviour that is intended to negatively affect an individual's ability to establish and maintain relations with others, work-related success and favourable reputation. Duffy et al. (2002) insisted that social undermining behaviours must be perceived as intentional by the target, the behaviours must weaken gradually or by degrees and verbal undermining can be both active and passive. Tepper (2000, p. 178) developed and tested a model of the consequences of abusive supervision. He referred to abusive supervision as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact". His definition focused on the subordinates' perceptions, thus making it a subjective assessment of abuse. Unlike Duffy et al. (2002), Tepper (2000) acknowledged that supervisors may not intend to cause harm and are motivated to act abusively in order to accomplish some other goal. His model of consequences suggested that for employees, abusive supervision is related to the measures of job satisfaction, life satisfaction, emotional satisfaction, organizational commitment and conflict between work and family, however, the various dimensions of justice (e.g. interactional, distributive, procedural) would play different roles in mediating those relationships.

Most of the extant literature on abusive leadership concentrates on the negative behaviour and outcomes associated with it. The conceptual work of Kets de Vries and Miller (1985) and Kets de Vries (2004) on narcissistic leadership and Einarsen et al. (2007) on destructive leadership, however, draw attention to both the positive and negative behaviours of abusive leadership. In developing her seven types of bad leadership, Kellerman (2004) also noted that bad leadership could be effective in some respects. Kets de Vries and Miller (1985) proposed three types of narcissistic leaders, namely, reactive, self-deceptive and constructive. Overall, they concluded that narcissistic leaders feel a sense of deprivation and emptiness and in an attempt to cover insecurities they often become driven to constantly establish their adequacy, status and superiority. Kets de Vries and Miller (1985) also argued that all individuals demonstrate some signs of narcissistic behaviour and that this may be necessary to function effectively in and outside of organizational life.

Einarsen et al. (2007) defined destructive leadership as repeated behaviour by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization. Destructive leadership can involve behaviours directed toward subordinates, as well as behaviours directed toward organizational goals and effectiveness. Einarsen et al. (2007) proposed four types of leadership and theorized that destructive leaders could exhibit both destructive and constructive behaviours simultaneously.

Our initial literature review reveals four key conclusions about the research to date on abusive leadership. First, there is a broad list of terms used to describe abusive leadership making it difficult

to generalize from study to study. Second, by most accounts, abusive leadership is presented as subjective, that is, based on the perception of the individuals experiencing it. Given the subjective nature of the phenomenon, it is surprising that most studies draw from research in other areas to develop scales and conceptual models (e.g. interpersonal justice, aggression). Third, in many incidences, the conceptualization of abuse is also narrow in focus (e.g. lording one's power, intentional) leaving many questions unanswered. Keashly's (2001) work is rare in that it adopted an exploratory, flexible methodological approach to allow individuals to describe experiences in their own terms. Fourth, despite their prevalence in the workforce, little research attention has been paid to young workers' attitudes, behaviours and work-related experiences (Loughlin and Barling, 2001). For example, the research of Vaez et al. (2004) on the frequency of abusive events among young workers and Dupre et al. (2006) on workplace aggression as an outcome of abusive supervisor, are among only a handful of studies that have examined young workers' experiences of abusive leadership. As Kets de Vries (2004) argued that past experiences influence present and future experiences. This transference means that relationships with past supervisors colour relationships with future supervisors. Therefore, it is likely that early experiences in the workforce with an abusive leader will negatively influence relationships with other leaders, as well as various other work-related attitudes and behaviours, in the future. A better understanding of how young workers experience abusive leadership and the outcomes of it will allow organizations to identify abusive leadership, intervene early in the young worker's career to address the negative experiences and in some cases prevent it from happening.

Research approach

For our purposes, we drew on Charmaz's (2006) work and understand grounded theory to be a flexible qualitative methodological choice that strives to build new theory. It is inductive and involves an iterative process of data collection and analysis and ongoing comparisons across data (Charmaz, 2006). In an attempt to understand the subjective experience of abusive leadership from the perspective of young workers, we felt it was best to develop our model based on the actual experiences of these workers. Constructivist grounded theory provided an effective means through which to accomplish this. A constructivist approach to grounded theory provided the means to embrace individual experience, while also moving toward generalization across participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory also offered a rigorous and systematic way to move from raw data to meaningful concepts and categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Methods

A total of 30 young workers (between the ages of 18-25) were interviewed for this study. The majority of these individuals were employed in the service industry in Canada, however, there were some participants employed in manufacturing and others that were working outside of Canada. The interviews were semi-structured, used open ended questions and ranged from 25 to 90 minutes. The interviews began by asking individuals to talk about their job and experiences at work. If it did not surface naturally, later in the interview participants were asked about their relationships with supervisors and co-workers. Individuals were always asked to describe critical incidents to illustrate their experiences. As advocated by Charmaz (2006) and Glaser and Strauss (1967), data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. Theoretical sampling guided data collection. An initial first five interviews were conducted and analyzed. It was deemed that experiences from a diversity of occupations, as well as whenever possible more than one individual from each workplace, would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Data analysis

Similar to template analysis (King, 2008a), data analysis in constructivist grounded theory is iterative and involves constant comparison and refinement of data. Template analysis is a method of thematically analyzing qualitative data (King, 2008b), while constructivist grounded theory is a methodology that advocates building theory, while providing a method for thematically analyzing the data collected. Both allow the researcher to consider relevant extant literature before beginning data

Data	Initial coding	Focused coding
Ok can you describe your supervisor for me?	Struggling with capturing supervisor Interpreting supervisor as asserting authority unnecessarily Interpreting manager sense of self versus how others see her	Interpreting manager sense of self versus how others see her
Jane – Um, ah trying to think of the word... power trip. She's on a power trip. Very full of herself. She thinks she's really good. She's not. She's an ok person but not a good supervisor	Interpreting manager sense of self versus how others see her Making distinction between her as a person and as a manager Using a psychiatric condition to describe manager (severity)	Using a psychiatric condition to describe manager (severity)
So what would be a typical interaction between the two of you?	Using a psychiatric condition to describe manager (severity)	Using a psychiatric condition to describe manager (severity)
Jane – It depends what kind of mood she's in. She's bi-polar. How so?	Diagnosing supervisor moods. Good mood = interpersonal. Bad mood = temper/unpredictable	Putting employees down Changing moods
Jane – So if she's in a good mood she wants to be your best friend and she'll talk to you about your life, well pretty much about her life. And if she's in a bad mood she will yell at you for absolutely nothing. Just because... just because	Inability to rationalize manager's behaviour Yelling	Putting employees down Feeling humiliated
So can you give me an example of a time where she did that?	Doing something that is not allowed under most circumstances	Putting employees down Feeling humiliated
Jane – Does it have to be with me?	Manager yelling before finding out circumstances	Putting employees down Feeling humiliated
No, not at all, anyone. With you, someone else	Performing job duties does not justify discipline	Putting employees down Feeling humiliated
Jane – There was one time where one of the girls was on the phone behind the cash and we're not supposed to go behind the cash unless we're already doing business. And this was business. And our supervisor yelled at this girl and it was inappropriate because she was doing her job and she made the girl feel badly about herself for doing work	Affecting sense of self because of supervisor	Putting employees down Feeling humiliated

collection and analysis, however, template analysis takes a much stronger position on developing a priori codes from the extant literature to use in data analysis. We felt that constructivist grounded theory was a more suitable methodological choice for the development of a model grounded in the experiences of young workers.

Our data analysis involved a process of initial coding (line-by line) and focused coding (line-by-line results into more significant categories) (Charmaz, 2006). Table I provides a sample from one transcript to illustrate the process of moving from initial coding to focused coding. Coding labels were processual to capture experience as dynamic and ongoing, rather than static (e.g. blurring the lines between personal and professional, feeling humiliated). Data collection continued as analysis occurred. Memo writing (Charmaz, 2006) was a critical component of the data analysis process. More than 20 memos inform the findings offered in this paper. These memos drew on focused codes and were revisited and revised throughout the process (e.g., category labels, description of categories). Below is presented a partial memo for diagnosing behaviour as bipolar:

Bipolar disorder is a psychiatric condition defined as recurrent episodes of significant disturbance in mood (Read and Purse, 2007). The moods can seem extreme and can occur on a spectrum that ranges from debilitating depression to unbridled mania. Sometimes the feelings of depression and mania can go back and forth quickly within the same day.

Numerous employees used bipolar disorder as a descriptor for their managers in order to capture the sudden, extreme changes in mood that they witnessed. Describing the manager as bipolar may also help the employee to rationalize why the manager's moods change suddenly, as employees were unable to think of any other logical explanation for the drastic shift in mood. There was most often no obvious trigger for the mood swing or the event that triggered the mood swing was so minute that employees were unable to believe that a "healthy" person would be affected by the event so severely. Employees were most often the ones who had to deal with the manager's various moods and came to expect the sudden changes. They knew that certain looks or actions were indicative of a bad mood swing.

"It depends what kind of mood she's in. She's bipolar. So if she's in a good mood she wants to be your best friend and she'll talk to you about your life, well pretty much about her life. And if she's in a bad mood she will yell at you for absolutely nothing. Just because ... just because." (Jane).

"Well she's like... the way that we kind of talk about her is she's really bipolar, like she'll go into work, I'm sure Jane's told you this, but she'll go into work and she'll be like super peppy, like she'll be like 'hey what's up?' Like she'll tell you all about her newest boy toy or like what's happening with her personal life, like blah blah blah. And then like, you'll turn around and come back and she'll just be cursing and stomping around with this furious look on her face and you're just like ok... and then she'll start yelling at you for doing something that, and like, she'll just punish you for the stupidest little things." (Julie).

"Yah she was really sketchy and she was a lunatic. She was like bipolar, she must have been bipolar. She would just lose it on some days. She would come into work hung-over, which isn't abnormal but like she once called me and said can you work for me because I'm hung-over. She called me at seven in the morning. I was really pissed but oh well, it was pretty funny. But like she'll like flip out and throw appliances, pans or I think she threw a knife once. I'm not sure. Oh yah, she was a looney. Not at me or anything but yah she was a looney. So yah she was sketchy." (Simon).

"She, just when you catch her, she gets in these really weird moods out of nowhere and they seem to be completely unfounded and unprovoked..." (Liam).

"Her personality would remind me of someone who was bipolar because she would go from

absolutely just up, because she'd get a compliment or something and be very happy, and then anything could just set her off and she'd be in a bad mood for the rest of the day." (Carmen).

Theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006) involved looking across the categories to explore the relationships among them. As a result of that process, we organize our findings around the behaviours, moderators (motivations and sensemaking processes) and outcomes (individual and organizational) of abusive leadership.

Findings

The wealth of data collected and analyzed for this project make it impossible to discuss all of the categories of data which contributed to the model of abusive leadership to be described in this section of the paper. As a result, the discussion of some aspects of the findings will rely on the use of a table to summarize categories.

Behaviours of abusive leadership

Participants' described a variety of behaviours perceived to be abusive. They were abusive in that they were perceived to be both hostile and non-hostile and occurred over a period of time during employment. These behaviours were interpreted as unfriendly, antagonistic, intimidating, displeasing or upsetting by the individuals experiencing it. An individual need not experience all of these behaviours for the supervisor to be considered abusive. Abusive behaviours were not always perceived as intentional. The range of behaviours experienced by these young workers include:

- playing favourites;
 - dealing dirty work as punishment;
 - threatening employees;
 - blurring the lines between personal and professional;
 - talking behind employees' backs;
 - putting employees down;
 - public criticism;
 - unrealistic expectations;
 - telling lies; and
 - illegal practices
- Table II offers a description and sample data for each of these categories.

Moderators of abusive leadership

There were several considerations that affected the relationship between behaviours and the outcomes of abusive leadership. First, for some participants, financial incentives (e.g. pay level, earnings potential, need for money) and the social relations built at work provided a means through which individuals could rationalize their decision to continue to work at the place of employment. These two motivations, namely, money and social atmosphere, moderated the relationship between behaviours and outcomes of abusive leadership. Second, some participants found it difficult to explain the underlying causes of abusive leadership. Individuals enter organizations expecting to be treated with respect and the experience of abusive leadership was interpreted as an unexplainable surprise event. In turn, individuals engaged in sense making processes to rationalize the otherwise unexplainable behaviour. Three sense making processes moderated the relationship between behaviours and outcomes of abusive leadership:

- (1) diagnosing behaviour as bipolar;
- (2) constructing as child; and
- (3) scrutinizing skills.

Behaviour	Description	Sample data
Playing favourites	<p>Perception that a supervisor views some employees more positively than others and as such provides these favourites with increased freedom, praise, better shifts, etc. Supervisors can use favourites as a means through which to punish an employee that has in some way displeased them. It is perceived to be a deliberate attempt to make one or more employees feel ostracized from the rest of the staff</p>	<p>She likes to pick on people, how do I say this? She picks on some people more than she does on others and I'm not sure if that's some twisted favourites way. She definitely gives certain people a much harder time than she does others. Like she gives me and Scott a really hard time about stuff and she gives two of the girls... really hard times about stuff too, unnecessarily hard (Liam)</p>
Dealing dirty work as punishment	<p>Perception that a supervisor assigns work to employees that is considered dirty or degrading as punishment (e.g. cleaning the toilets)</p>	<p>[Haley] had been working there for five years. She knew everything, she was taught everything, and she basically could have been a manager. Maura pretty much used her as a punching bag. If something was wrong, it was Haley's fault. Haley always got the dirty work, had to be called in if somebody called in sick, something like that. Haley also had to kind of support herself, put herself through school, pay for her own braces and all that kind of crap (Simon)</p>
Threatening employees	<p>Making threats is an act whereby one party warns another party that there will be a specific consequence if a particular action is taken. It is perceived by the individual as stressful and creates a fear-driven environment if bosses are constantly using threats as a means for control</p>	<p>And then later on that day, my cousin... was asking me about my summer plans and I was just like "yeah I might go up and work for my Dad... it's not like he's going to fire me or anything." And she [the boss] was walking by at this time, turns to me "you better not be talking about here." And I was just like "no actually I was talking about my Dad." I was kind of like nervous because I didn't know what she was going to say and she was just like "Oh well because I wouldn't be too sure about the whole firing part"... the way she said it just made it seem like she was planning to fire me or something which really hurt me because I've done absolutely everything I could for her (Julie)</p>

(continued)

Table II.

Behaviour	Description	Sample data
Unrealistic expectations	<p>It is perceived to be unacceptable when an employer leads employees to believe that they must do everything that is asked of them – even tasks that are perceived to be unreasonable. From giving employees an hour's notice to come in to work for a shift to punishing employees who cannot fulfill the employer's unrealistic expectations of perfection, sometimes it is impossible for employees to meet their boss' demands</p>	<p>She answered [the phone] and it was Bob [the boss] so she told him that she would put him on hold for a minute. She picks up the phone and she says "Sorry about that, I was just ringing a customer through" and he cuts her off and I was standing there next to her like listening to her and her face just dropped, she was so upset looking. She's like "Bob I'm so sorry" and she's apologizing and stuff and I guess he's yelling at her saying "If you think serving a customer is more important than talking to your boss then you are completely wrong and you should never put me aside." She says "I'm sorry Bob, you always said to put the customer first and to try to make the customer happy." He said "No, when Susan and I call down we're your number one</p>
Telling lies	<p>Whether it is about pay, hours, job description, perks, etc. it is perceived to be inappropriate for someone in a position of authority to "lie" to their subordinates</p>	<p>priority, we're the ones paying your cheques, and you work for us." She was closing that night and when she was finally finished and was ready to set the alarm and go, he said "You're fired, don't come back tomorrow" (Lisa) She'll promise you something and she won't give it to you. She promised a raise and I have yet to see it. She promised me so many hours a week, don't get those hours. Same with other people. Forced me to get a second job. This year I approached her and I was like listen, I'm going to have to get a third job if you don't give me thirty hours. She's like you will get thirty hours. Don't have it. So... (John) Every paycheck I was short, I was working probably one hundred hours every two weeks and in one paycheck for two weeks they had me billed at 50 hours. Every two weeks I'd be missing 50 hours. I'm also still waiting for a paycheck for \$700. The thing is it's seasonal so the restaurant isn't even open and I have no way to contact anyone (Vanessa)</p>
Illegal practices	<p>Illegal practices encompass any actions that the boss takes at work that are outside legal boundaries. It can be anything from short changing employees on their paycheques to stealing tips from the employees</p>	<p>Every paycheck I was short, I was working probably one hundred hours every two weeks and in one paycheck for two weeks they had me billed at 50 hours. Every two weeks I'd be missing 50 hours. I'm also still waiting for a paycheck for \$700. The thing is it's seasonal so the restaurant isn't even open and I have no way to contact anyone (Vanessa)</p>

Motivations

Most of the participants were still in school at some level (high school or university) and were highly motivated by money. Many of them had to save money to pay for their education, while others needed some kind of steady job to pay for their living expenses. In some cases, employees were able to minimize the effects abuse because they believed the money was worth it or they felt “stuck” and needed the money to live. Jane explained that she tolerates her abusive boss because the commission-based pay structure at her place of employment means she gets paid well and the trade off is worth it to her. At the same time, she noted how some of her co-workers tolerate the abuse for fear of losing their jobs; they have little choice and need the money. “They [other employees] don’t have a choice. They don’t put up with it [the abuse] or they get the money, so most people want the money. We’re on commission and I sell well and I make a lot of money. The only reason I’m still here is because of the money”.

Most individuals working in the service sector described how they had a lot of interaction with their co-workers. If participants enjoyed the social atmosphere with their co-workers, those positive interactions moderated the effects of the negative interactions they had with their boss. Some employees focused on the positive social atmosphere in order to remain motivated enough to continue to go to work. Moreover, employees often vented their frustrations about their boss to each other and consequently formed social groups based on these experiences.

Vanessa explained that she is friendly with most of the staff at the restaurant where she works. She described how it much easier to deal with her boss because she was able to vent her frustrations to her co-workers, who found themselves in the same position. She also mentioned another moderator, money. Between having friends at work and making good money as a server, she was able to tolerate her abusive boss.

School doesn’t stress me out, exams and big rugby games don’t stress me out. I had never been stressed until I started working there. I’d go to work, come home stressed, upset, hating my boss everyday. I liked the work because I liked the people and I liked the money and I liked the staff. That’s what made it bearable. I think it helped because all the staff were in the same situation. I had twenty great friends from the summer that I worked with so we talked about it a lot (Vanessa, 20).

Sense making processes

Employees also engaged in a variety of sense making processes to minimize the impact of the abuse. These processes mostly involved reconstructing the supervisor in negative ways. Participants described their supervisors as bipolar, childish and lacking business and managerial skills, thus calling into question the supervisor’s credibility. By discrediting the supervisor, employees’ minimized the supervisor’s importance and authority and moderated the effects of the abuse. The more persuasive the sense making process, that is, the more the individual believed her boss to be unqualified or unintelligent, the greater the moderating effect.

Diagnosing behaviour as bipolar involved explaining the sudden, extreme changes in moods by the supervisor as a medical condition in order to rationalize the otherwise unexplainable change in behaviour. Julie explained that she and her co-workers refer to her supervisor as “bipolar” and that the supervisor’s mood changes without warning from friendly and inclusive to angry and punitive.

She’ll go into work and she’ll be like super peppy, like she’ll be like “hey what’s up?” She’ll tell you all about her newest boy toy or like what’s happening with her personal life, blah blah blah. Then you’ll turn around and she’ll just be cursing and stomping around with this furious look on her face and you’re just like ok.. . . and then she’ll start yelling at you for doing something that, and she’ll just punish you for the stupidest little things (Julie).

Participants also dismissed supervisors' authority by referring to them as a child or as possessing childlike qualities. In this process of constructing as child, supervisors were positioned as immature and incapable of fulfilling adult responsibilities to such an extent that the supervisor was stripped of credibility. Kelly explained how her supervisor's behaviour was similar to that of an adolescent. It is common for adolescents in grade school to criticize others behind their backs, rather than expressing the criticisms face-to-face. In doing this, Kelly implied that as a supervisor she should know better. Moreover, Kelly positioned herself as the more mature person in the supervisor-subordinate relationship. "It seems so immature on her part, I felt like I was in middle school. She never directly said anything to the people she had problems with".

Finally, participants also engaged in a process of scrutinizing skills to make sense of the experience of abuse. This involved critically assessing the technical or management skills (or lack thereof) of supervisors in an attempt to minimize the significance of the supervisor's role in the organization. John noted that his supervisor's lack of professionalism about business standards, the inability to manage people and questionable tactics in scheduling and paying workers partly explained the overall abusive nature of management in the organization. In doing this, John was able to explain the abusive behaviours and reduce the effect of the abuse. For other participants, however, scrutinizing skills increased the severity of the negative outcomes.

We're all supposed to wear uniforms. I asked her to get me a uniform, I'm still waiting. I've worn questionable clothing like flip flops to work, shown up late, I'm on my phone all the time, I watch movies at work on my computer and she knows I do all of this. It's also the stuff that she'll do when you're not around like the scheduling of hours and the pay and stuff like that.

Outcomes of abusive leadership

Individual outcomes. Individuals experienced both emotional and physical outcomes as a result of the abusive leadership to which they were subjected. Three emotional responses were revealed including:

- (1) feeling hopeless;
- (2) feeling humiliated; and
- (3) feeling anxious.

Three physical outcomes were also revealed:

- (1) justifying retaliation;
- (2) distancing; and
- (3) leaving to cope.

As a result of the experience of abusive leadership, some participants described a feeling of powerlessness and an inability to make a difference to the less than desirable situation; a feeling of hopelessness. Some participants described how they felt there was nothing they could do or say to please their boss. With no hope of change, there was a sense of resignation that accompanied the hopelessness. Some employees described how they felt that the only thing they could do was to give up on a better future and just persevere. Karen had signed a contract which stipulated that she could not quit before her four months were over. She told her boss on multiple occasions that she wanted to quit, but to no avail. She felt that there was nothing she could do to get out of contract and she felt like there was no one she could talk to about the abuse she endured from her boss.

There was a lot of hostility in the air and everyday I went into work I told my boss I'm quitting, but there were restrictions that I could not quit. I was probably more upset when I got home from work because I had more time to think about it and I realized I had to go back tomorrow. I felt depressed, yeah depressed. That's the only way to say it. . . I felt that I was just a summer student and no one was going to listen to me. That's kind of the vibe I was getting. Suck it up and get out of there as fast as I can (Karen).

Participants also experienced feelings of humiliation as a result of the abusive behaviours of their supervisors. This involved a sense of worthlessness or embarrassment. This feeling was amplified when it occurred publicly. Lisa recalled a time when her supervisor came into the place of employment as a consumer to dine with his family. The supervisor specifically requested that Lisa serve him and he criticized her in front of his family. She left the area and went to the washroom to cry. On returning, he continued to humiliate her by criticizing her in the middle of the restaurant, in front of customers and other employees.

He said "Half of what you were doing you did wrong so I don't know if this is going to work. We're going to test you again in another week and we'll see if you can continue working here". I went to the washroom and cried because I just felt like total crap. I came back out of the washroom and you could tell that I had been crying. He comes over to me and I was expecting him to say sorry that was really harsh. But he says "that's constructive criticism and you need to be able to handle that" and walks away (Lisa).

Participants also revealed that working in an abusive environment increased anxiety levels, inside and outside of work. Many participants reported an increase in their anxiousness or a general sense of depression that stayed with them even after they had gone home for the day. Carmen was so anxious and upset about her experiences of abuse by her supervisor that it affected her sleeping patterns. "I developed sleeping problems because she [supervisor] caused me so much stress. The first week, I would go home, cry, go to bed, get up and go to work for the day. Then I started to develop a sleeping problem. I never had sleeping problems before. I felt like I was dragging myself along".

Participants also described physical responses to the abuse they experienced. Justifying retaliation was a process that involved employees "getting back" at those who wronged them. Some participants sabotaged the organization's goals, others put little or no effort into performing their job and others stole from the organization. Simon, for example, explained that he and his co-workers took food and drinks from their place of employment. He justified it by explaining that his boss mistreated them, so they were going to mistreat their boss in other ways (e.g. by not ringing in their food through the register or by doing minimal cleaning). "The reaction is if she's going to screw us one way, we're going to screw her right back through inventory. Or we'll make ourselves something to eat and not ring it through, which basically constitutes theft technically".

Some participants attempted to create physical space from their supervisors. This process of distancing involved a variety of methods to construct distance from the manager and avoid being yelled out, put down or criticized. Common avoidance tactics described by employees included, trying to physically avoid their manager while at work (e.g. spending time in another part of the store or trying to be occupied with a customer) and trying to keep every interaction with the supervisor as short as possible in order to decrease the chances of a conflict. In some cases, employees became increasingly absent from work and, in extreme cases, quit the job altogether. Jane noted that she tries to ignore her supervisor or limit the interactions she has with her when the supervisor is in a "bad mood". "If she's having a particularly bad week, you have a bad week. I ignore her, try not to do anything that will piss her off. Stay out of her way, I just don't interact with her at all". Tom noted how he often walks away from his supervisors or tries hard to tune them out because it is not worth engaging. "The only thing you can do is turn your head and turn off your mind. When they are talking, pretend it's the teacher from Charlie Brown".

For some individuals, the abuse they experienced was too much for them and they ended up leaving to cope, rather than staying and dealing with the abuse. We interpreted this outcome to be both individual and organizational. It will be discussed under organizational outcomes.

Organizational outcomes. Two organizational outcomes were salient in the stories of individuals:

- (1) employee turnover; and
- (2) creating a destructive culture.
- (3)

Some individuals left to cope with the abuse they experienced at work. If undetected, this employee turnover could have significant costs for the organization in regards to training, disruption to productivity, and job satisfaction. Tom described the phenomenon of constant turnover at his place of employment. He explained how it was difficult for individuals to stay in those terrible working conditions.

They're slowly dwindling and walking out. They're [management] are constantly looking for people because there is such high turnover. If a dishwasher makes it three days that means they can make it a month and that's normally all they will make it. Everyone there is actively looking for another job (Tom).

An abusive workplace arrangement could also serve to create a destructive culture whereby the hostile and non-hostile behaviours of abusive supervisors resulted in a climate of distrust, disloyalty and low morale among employees. New employees entering the organization came into an environment where sabotage, low morale, self-interest were the norms and this in turn would likely impact the newcomers' behaviours and attitudes at work as well.

Discussion. A model of abusive leadership

Defining abusive leadership

Based on the experiences of the young workers involved in this study abusive leadership is defined as:

. . . employees' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in hostile and non-hostile (e.g. unfriendly, intimidating, displeasing or upsetting) verbal and non-verbal behaviours – excluding physical contact – over an extended period of time. These behaviours may or may not be conscious actions by the supervisor, but whether conscious or not, the consequences can be far reaching for the employees, social groups and organizations as a whole.

Overall, our definition is most similar to Tepper's definition of abusive supervision. In the discussion that follows we draw attention to several aspects of abusive leadership revealed in our findings and compare those aspects to the extant literature. These aspects include:

- the experience of abusive leadership is subjective;
- the abuse is downward;
- the abuse is hostile and non-hostile, verbal and non-verbal, but not physical;
- the behaviour is repeated over time;
- abusive leadership is not always intended; and
- there are individual, group and organizational outcomes of abusive leadership.

This study sought to understand employees' perceptions of abusive leadership, much like the research on abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), workplace bullying (Hoel and Cooper, 2001) and emotional abuse (Keashly, 2001). Some of the findings of this research indicated that there are similarities between the experience of abusive leadership of young workers and that of other demographic groups. One distinct difference of our findings from the extant literature was the moderators that were revealed from our research. We contend that a qualitative approach better allowed us to access rich descriptions of the subjective experience of abusive leadership and provided an opportunity to uncover these unique findings. We suggest that future research continue to adopt qualitative approaches until a more complete picture of abusive leadership has been developed. This will move us toward bridging the various conceptualizations of abusive leadership currently being used in the literature.

Similar to Tepper (2000), Ashforth (1994, 1997) and Einarsen et al. (2007) we argue that it is important to distinguish downward abuse from horizontal abuse. For example, the literature on workplace bullying looks at employees' perceptions, but Hoel and Cooper (2001) examined abuse between co-workers, as well as between supervisors and subordinates, much like Keashly (1998) and her work on emotional abuse. Distinguishing the abuse as downward in the hierarchy is a key element of this study due to the significant role of power differential. Ashforth (1994, 1997) aptly described bosses as "lording their power" over a subordinate, which is a good description of the way in which managers reinforce and remind subordinates of the power differential that exists.

The hostile and non-hostile behaviours in which supervisors engage were found to be both verbal and non-verbal, but were never physical. Only Tepper (2000) explicitly excludes physical contact in his definition. Based on our findings, similar to Olson et al. (2006), we argue that the full range of abusive behaviours need to be considered and managed, not just the those that are physical. Both Tepper (2000) and Keashly (1998) also highlighted the verbal and non-verbal nature of the abuse. Tepper (2000) did not include non-hostile behaviours in his conceptualization of abusive supervisor and was critical of Ashforth (1994, 1997) who did include it in his conceptualization of petty tyranny (Tepper, 2007). We argue that abusive leadership can be both hostile and non-hostile.

The repeated nature of the abuse has been given serious consideration in the literature (Duffy et al., 2002; Einarsen et al., 2007; Hoel and Cooper, 2001; Tepper, 2000) and we found it to be a key characteristic described by participants. Each participant depicted a picture of abuse that occurred on a regular basis over an extended period of time, as opposed to any single incident. This is an important distinction because abusive leadership does not refer to a boss that loses their temper when they have a bad day every once in a while. Rather, abusive leadership refers to those bosses that display sustained abusive behaviours.

Considering the intent of the supervisor was another important finding in this study. Many participants expressed the conviction that their boss was unaware of the behaviour they displayed, thus minimizing the role of intent in the process. Many studies in the past have found that intent is a central part of abusive behaviour (e.g. Duffy et al., 2002; Ferris et al., 2007), however, the majority of those studies used quantitative data. Similar to Keashly's (1998,2001) work, the qualitative nature of this study gave participants the opportunity to provide thick descriptions of their experiences and there was little or no support for the finding that intent plays a central role in abusive leadership.

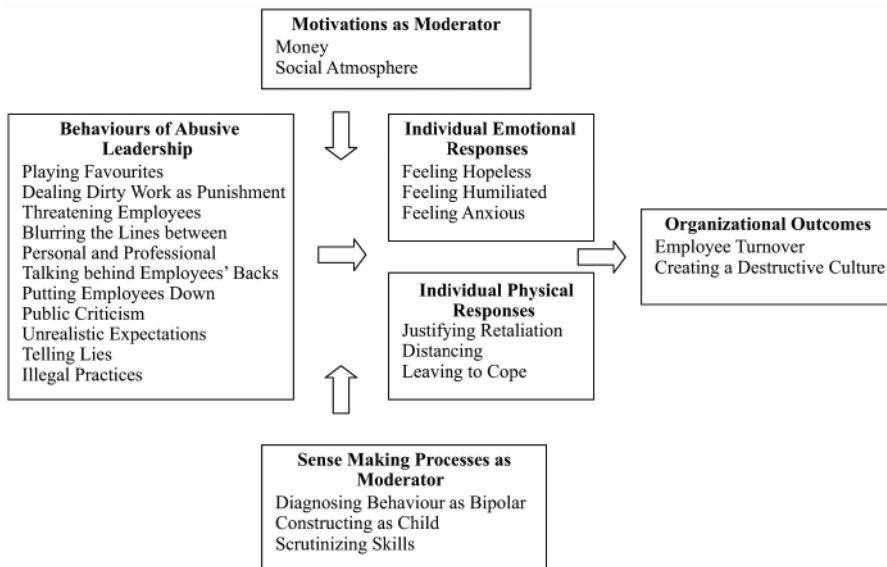
The final part of our definition looks to the consequences of abusive leadership, which extend to employees, social groups and the organization as a whole. In their definition of destructive leadership, Einarsen et al. (2007) recognized the consequences for both the individual employees and the organization as a whole. The significance of consequences for employees is often studied (Bamberger and Bacharach, 2006; Duffy et al., 2002; Tepper, 2000), but organizational consequences must not be overlooked or forgotten in the process. Contrary to the work of Einarsen et al. (2007), Kellerman (2004), Kets de Vries and Miller (1985) and Kets de Vries (2004) we found

little evidence that abusive leadership could be constructive. Lipman-Blumen (2005) focused on the followers of toxic leaders and argued that one constructive outcome of toxic leadership is that individuals have the opportunity to develop greater self-esteem. In our research, with the exception of one or two individuals who noted that the experience of abusive leadership had made them more assertive and confident or made them work harder in an attempt to avoid the abusive behaviour, the outcomes of abusive leadership were negative.

A unique contribution

Figure 1 depicts the model of abusive leadership as developed through this research project. Most of the behaviours of an abusive leader evident in this research are also present in one way or another in the current literature on abusive leadership (e.g. Ashforth, 1994,1997; Bamberger and Bacharach, 2006; Baron and Neuman, 1998; Craig and Gustafson, 1998; Duffy et al., 2002; Keashly, 2001; Keashly et al., 1994; Tepper, 2000; Vaez et al., 2004; Robinson and Bennett, 1995). For example, some the behaviours identified in our research align with Kellerman’s (2004) seven types of bad leadership. Dealing dirty work as punishment, putting employees down and public criticism align with callous leadership (e.g. uncaring, unkind); blurring the lines between personal and professional aligns with intemperate leadership (e.g. lacks self-control and facilitated by followers unwilling to intervene); and, telling lies and illegal practices align with corrupt leadership (e.g. lie, cheat, steal). Not all of the behaviours we identified, however, can be found in one study. In this way, our research demonstrates the broad range of behaviours that young workers perceive to be abusive leadership. This will need further exploration across a larger sample of young workers.

Our research also offered support for the findings revealed in existing literature pertaining to the outcomes of abusive leadership (e.g. Ashforth, 1994, 1997; Duffy et al., 2002; Frone, 2000; Grandey et al., 2007; Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000, 2007; Yagil, 2006). The emotional outcomes revealed here begin to address Brief and Weiss’ (2002) call for additional empirical research on leaders’ affect on followers’ moods and emotions. Carstensen et al.’s (2000) research on emotional experience across the adult life span (ages 18 to 94) is also useful in making sense of our findings. Carstensen et al.’s (2000) findings indicated that the frequency of negative emotions declined as an individual aged (up to approximately age 60). For example, an individual 18 years of age was likely to experience more negative emotions than a 34 year old and a 34-year-old was likely to experience more negative emotions than a 65 year old. In addition, they revealed emotional regulation was greater in older adults than in younger adults (e.g.



tendency to maintain highly positive states, tendency to maintain the absence of negative emotional states). Reflecting on our findings, this might mean that younger workers are more likely than their older counterparts to perceive leadership as abusive and that the experience of abuse may be more severe for young workers than “older” workers because of a lower level of emotion regulation.

Based on our findings, we also argue that it is increasingly important to focus on the organizational outcomes of abusive leadership as well (e.g. Kets de Vries (2004) work on neurotic organizations). Overall, there will be significant costs associated with abusive leadership, manifested through an unethical organizational culture, high employee turnover, employee retaliation and distancing.

The most significant contribution of this research rests with the moderators that were revealed. These moderators have not been addressed by the existing literature on abusive leadership. This can be explained by the general approach taken to understanding abusive leadership – most studies look at either the behaviours of abusive leaders or the effects on employees. Few moderators are discussed in the literature, aside from considerations of personality differences (Bamberger and Bacharach, 2006; Skarlicki et al., 1999), which are particularly relevant in the victimization literature (Aquino, 2000; Aquino and Byron, 2002). We suggest that the moderators identified in this research be included in future research, particularly to assess differences between the ways in which young workers and adults cope with an abusive leader. Lipman-Blumen (2005) argued that building social bonds was one of the constructive outcomes for followers of toxic leaders. Here we propose that the social atmosphere may indeed serve to moderate the impact of abusive leadership for young workers. Of particular interest is the sense making processes of the young workers. We contend that the experience of abusive leadership was interpreted as a surprise event (Louis, 1980), unexplainable to the individual. This unfamiliar experience triggered a sense making process (Weick, 1995) allowing individuals to rationalize why the supervisor’s moods change suddenly. Additional research across a larger sample of young workers and comparative research between young workers and other demographic groups is needed to better understand these relationships.

Conclusions

In this paper we have provided a model of abusive leadership as experienced by young workers. The adoption of constructivist grounded theory allowed us to ground our findings in the unique experiences of young workers. Our definition and model of abusive leadership revealed some similarities to the extant literature. The moderators that were revealed suggested possible avenues for future exploration across a larger sample of young workers and comparative work between young workers and other demographic groups.

The limitations of this study also highlight possible avenues for future research. First, many of these employees were temporary workers enrolled in secondary education institutions and employed only for the summer on a full-time basis. Some of these temporary workers did continue employment on a part-time basis at the end of summer when they had resumed studies or they had worked at the organization during

a previous summer. Most participants, however, knew they were not tied to the organization for the long term nor did they see their employment there as a career. The temporary nature of the sample may have influenced their perceptions of abusive leadership in such a way that either made the outcomes more or less severe. Future research should include a larger sample of both temporary and permanent young workers. Second, most participants were employed in the service sector. It would be interesting to investigate whether the findings of this research could be replicated across a larger sample of participants working outside of the service sector. Third, the size of our sample makes it difficult to generalize across all young workers. We continued data collection until no new categories were revealed, however, our sample of 30 is still somewhat small given the two previous limitations.

Finally, this research has significant practical implications. As inferred by the research of Carstensen et al. (2000) and Kets de Vries (2004), the experience of abusive leadership by young workers may be more severe than that experienced by older workers and it is likely to have long-term effects on the young worker. If this is accurate, the first experiences of young adults in the working world may impact their attitudes, self-esteem, health and safety, job satisfaction and job performance throughout their working lives.

We argue that the first step in addressing abusive leadership in organization is to acknowledge that bad leadership is as common as good leadership. Management also needs to become aware of the behaviours that are considered abusive by subordinates, so that abusive leadership can be identified and dealt with quickly. Selection devices need to be established to weed out abusive leaders, supervisor performance evaluations need to seriously take into account subordinate perceptions and sensitivity training needs to be developed to ensure leaders understand the impact of certain behaviours on workers. Finally, orientation programs should socialize newcomers (to the organization and to the working world in general) about appropriate and inappropriate norms of leader behaviour and provide constructive outlets through which abused subordinates' voices can be heard. These measures will improve employee well-being and certainly reduce organizational costs in the long run.

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