Abusive Supervision and Work Alienation: An Exploratory Study

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Recent research on "dark" leadership reveals that subordinates who work for abusive supervisors report a number of negative outcomes. We explored whether employees who experience abuse from their supervisors reported more work alienation. We predicted that abusive supervision would "trickle down," decreasing subordinates' psychological links with their work. Regression analysis revealed no significant relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and subordinates' work alienation. However, the results provide a basis for future research. The findings, though unexpected, paint a brighter picture for those enduring work with a "dark" leader.

INTRODUCTION

Recent research has focused on the "dark" side of leadership and its deleterious effects on organizations and their members. Dark leaders are destructive; over time, they negatively influence subordinates in ways that are hostile and/or obstructive (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). One type of destructive leader is the abusive supervisor – a person whom subordinates perceive as engaged in "the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Most people can recall at least one time when they were targeted at work for non-physical abuse (Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994), and an estimated 13.6 percent of US workers are affected by sustained abuse (Tepper, 2007). Employees regard abusive supervision as unjust (Tepper, 2000); it increases their psychological distress and their desire to quit (Tepper, 2000), reduces their satisfaction with their jobs and their lives (Tepper, 2000) and suppresses their creativity (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012), commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007).

Despite these documented negative outcomes, one unexplored area is whether negative outcomes from the exposure to abusive supervisors transcend the immediate subordinate-supervisor dynamic and sour employees on their work. Our study explores this gap by measuring the extent to which employees who experience abusive supervision report greater alienation from work. Alienation is the degree to which a person identifies psychologically with his or her work (Kanungo, 1982). The alienated worker perceives that work is unable to satisfy his or her salient needs and expectations; he or she cares little for

work, labors primarily for extrinsic rewards, and exhibits little energy or enthusiasm (Moch, 1980; Michaels, Cron, Dubinsky & Joachimsthaler, 1988). If having an abusive supervisor predicts alienation from work, the effects of supervisory abuse could be far-reaching – following employees to subsequent jobs or affecting their relationships with future supervisors.

Abusive Supervision

Whether or not supervisor behavior is severe enough to be deemed abusive by subordinates is subjective (Tepper, 2000). The same behavior in two different contexts could be viewed differently in terms of abuse; furthermore, the same behavior could be interpreted differently by subordinates (Tepper, 2000). Thus, the subordinate's perception of the leader's behavior defines abuse (see Schyns & Schilling, 2013). We focus, therefore, on each respondent's perceptions of his or her supervisor's actions.

In general, subordinates are more likely to label their supervisors as abusive when their supervisors ridicule and belittle them, remind them of past mistakes and failures, tell them they are incompetent, speak poorly about them to others, and engage in other similarly hostile behavior (Tepper, 2000). Paulhus and Williams (2002) posited that narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy form a "dark triad" that often emerges in toxic or abusive leadership behavior. While these behaviors also have positive outcomes, such as getting ahead, they also increase the likelihood that supervisors will engage in negative, destructive behavior toward subordinates (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). In addition to supervisors having a propensity to abuse subordinates, some researchers theorize that abusive supervision stems from hostility that "trickles down" from the supervisor experiencing abuse from his or her supervisor (e.g., Aryee, et al., 2007; Liu, et al., 2012); others suggest that subordinate characteristics, such as poor work performance, incite supervisor abuse (e.g., Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011). These relationships likely are complex. For example, one study found that poor-performing subordinates stoked supervisor hostility; the poor performance led to abusive supervision especially for supervisors who tended to interpret subordinate behavior as hostile, and when the supervisor was less mindful in his or her behavior and relied more on habitual tendencies (Liang, Lian, Brown, Ferris, Hanig, & Keeping, 2016).

Regardless of the antecedents and the mechanisms by which abusive supervision manifests, its presence results in damaged relationships and negative outcomes. Subordinates with abusive supervisors are more likely to experience strain (e.g., job tension, emotional exhaustion), especially when they have lower levels of positive affect (Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007). These workers receive lower performance ratings, with the relationship moderated by the meaning they derive from their work (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007). Subordinates experiencing such abuse are more likely to be frustrated with their jobs and engage in more deviance (Avey, Wu, & Holley, 2015). They also are less satisfied and more likely to turn over (Tepper, 2000). Meta-analytic research found that employees who were exposed to destructive leadership experienced effects that were wider than the work environment; specifically, they found that destructive leadership related strongly to negative affect, lower personal well-being, and higher occupational stress (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). We investigate whether greater work alienation should be listed among these negative outcomes; that is, does abusive supervision transcend the specific employment context in which the perceived abuse takes place by affecting attitudes toward work?

Work Alienation

Work alienation represents a distinct aspect of work commitment; specifically, it describes the extent to which a person is engaged in the work role (Hirschfeld & Field, 2000). Alienated workers distance themselves psychologically from a specific type of work (Kanungo, 1982); they are estranged (Korman, Wittig-Berman, & Lang, 1981) or disengaged from the work role (Fedi, Pucci, Tartaglia, & Rollero, 2016) and they dissociate from the work process or product (Shantz, Alfes, Bailey, & Soane, 2015). Those who feel alienated from their work are more likely to engage in deviant or counterproductive work behavior, to be rated as poor performers (Shantz, et al., 2015), to experience job dissatisfaction, and to report lower job involvement (Fedi, et al., 2016).

Elements of the job itself contribute to alienation. In particular, lower task identity and lower task variety predict higher alienation (Shantz, et al., 2015). Lack of meaningful work and inability to express oneself also predict alienation (Nair & Vohra, 2010). However, one of the strongest predictors is the lack of affiliative satisfaction, or the extent to which the employee's job experiences interfere with the employee's ability to receive interpersonal satisfaction from people outside the job (e.g., family) or on the job (e.g., co-workers) (Korman, et al., 1981).

Affiliations or relationships workers have with others predict alienation in a number of ways. For example, Fedi, et al. (2016) found that Italian workers reported that work-family conflict contributed to work alienation for both low- and high-status occupations. Poor quality work relationships (e.g., co-worker relations) strongly predicted alienation in a sample of Indian knowledge workers (Nair & Vohra, 2010); however, these results have not been replicated with other samples (e.g., Shantz, et al., 2015). Shantz, et al. (2015) suggested that cultural differences explain these disparate findings; a multi-country study conducted by Banai and Reisel (2007) supports this assertion. In particular, they found that supportive leadership significantly predicted alienation in many countries, but concluded that it explains variance in alienation based on cultural environments (Banai & Reisel, 2007). Supportive leaders were defined as those bosses who "create interest, assist independent decision-making, allow for learning through mistakes, and provide a realistic set of plans to guide action" (Banai & Reisel, 2007, 466-467). They contend that in countries with lower power distance, such as the United States, leader support is expected and needed where there are fewer substitutes for leadership, such as strong professional norms and work rules (Banai & Reisel, 2007). It follows that transformational leaders, who consider followers' needs and inspire others, are less likely to engender alienation than leaders who practice a transactional style (Sarros, Tanewski, Winter, Santora, & Densten, 2002).

These results are consistent with self-determination theory (SDT), which states that work environments that satisfy our basic needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence lead to our psychological growth and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Abusive supervision interacts with the leader-employee relationship to predict organizational counter-productivity by affecting psychological need satisfaction (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012). Specifically, Lian, et al. (2012) found that abusive supervision was more detrimental to employees when the supervisor normally had a good relationship with the employee. In addition, abusive supervision promoted employee counter-productivity via the employees' perceptions of how well their needs (e.g., relatedness, autonomy, competence) were being met (Lian, et al., 2012). Having little or no control over an abusive supervisor's actions would discourage the employee from seeing the work as satisfying his or her salient needs. In fact, one would expect that the employee would be more likely to view the work as just a job to receive pay (i.e., "I work for pay….why else would I put up with such a lousy supervisor?"). Consistent with SDT, we expect that the abusive supervisor's interruption of need fulfillment will contribute to work alienation (part of psychological growth and well-being).

Hypothesis

For the most part, research predicts that a supportive work environment with quality work relationships is less likely to result in alienation. We expect that abusive supervision, with its sustained hostility (Tepper, 2000), interferes with work relationships, interrupts need fulfillment (e.g., Lian, et al., 2012) and contributes to alienation consistent with Nair and Vohra's (2010) findings. The abusive supervisor does not a) support followers, b) consider followers' needs, or c) inspire followers; we expect, consistent with Sarros, et al. (2002) and Banai and Reisel (2007), that subordinates of these supervisors will show greater alienation from their work. Thus, we propose that:

H: Employees who experience higher levels of abusive supervision will report greater work alienation.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

As part of a required class project at a medium-sized university in the southern United States (US), students collected a total of 1,535 email addresses via campus intercepts and contact lists. Potential respondents received an invitation to participate in an online "Business Leadership" survey; non-responders got two reminders to participate. Safeguards prevented respondents from participating more than once. 1,079 people (70.3%) responded; 82 (7.6%) failed to meet work or age requirements, 45 (4.7%) skipped all items, and 3 left over 50 percent of the items blank. These cases were removed from the dataset, resulting in 949 useable surveys.

Over half (56.1%) of the respondents were female. Most (77.4%) identified as White/Caucasian, 12 percent as Black/African American, and 4.4 percent as Asian. The average age was 36.72 years (n = 927, SD = 14.985). Almost one-fourth (21.7%) held a graduate degree; only 8.5 percent had no college experience.

Measures

Abusive supervision was measured using seven items of Tepper's (2000) 15-item scale. Our survey included a toxic leadership measure (Schmidt, 2008) that included portions of Tepper's (2000) abusive supervision items, but not the full scale. Therefore, we measured abusive supervision with this shorter version. Items measured the extent to which the supervisor ridiculed and publicly belittled subordinates, invaded the privacy of subordinates, reminded subordinates of past mistakes, expressed anger at subordinates for unknown reasons, spoke poorly about subordinates in front of others, and told subordinates they were incompetent. The instructions asked respondents to consider the most destructive supervisor in their work history and rate his or her behavior on a 6-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicated greater abusive supervision. The shortened scale exhibited strong reliability (α = .926).

Work alienation was assessed using Miller's (1967) five-item measure. Respondents used a 6-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree) to assess their current (or most recent) job. They considered their sense of pride or accomplishment from their work, their pride from doing a job well, how much they liked their work, the extent to which their job gave them a chance to do the things they liked to do best, and the extent to which their job was their most rewarding experience. Higher scores reflected greater personal work alienation, not necessarily estrangement from coworkers or social alienation. The measure met the expectations for reliability (α = .807).

RESULTS

Abusive supervision was not significantly correlated with work alienation ($r(885) = -.040$, ns). Thus, initially, our data failed to support our hypothesis. Interestingly, older workers rated their most destructive supervisor as more abusive than did younger workers ($r(877) = .075$, $p < .05$); however, the older workers reported significantly lower work alienation ($r(914) = -.281$, $p < .01$). Although age was not specified as a moderator in our initial hypothesis, we investigated the potential explanatory effects of this variable using the Process procedure by Hayes (2013). Table 1 presents the results.

TABLE 1
REGRESSION RESULTS FOR AGE, ABUSIVE SUPERVISION, AND THE INTERACTION ON WORK ALIENATION

R	R^2	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.2722	.0741	21.28	23.09	3	866	.000
Model	Coeff(b)	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	16.81	1.24	13.59	.000	14.38	19.23
Age	-.13	.03	-4.00	.001	-.19	-.06
Abusive Supervision	-.06	.04	-1.45	.148	-.15	.02
Interaction	.01	.01	1.33	.184	-.01	.01

Abusive supervision was not a significant predictor of work alienation. Without considering age, there was no effect for experience with abusive supervision on perceptions of work alienation. However, the regression coefficient for age was significant. Assuming no abusive supervision, those who were differed by one unit on their age had an estimated difference in work alienation of -.1250. The regression coefficient for the interaction between abusive supervision and age was not significant; thus, the effect of abusive supervision on work alienation did not depend on the age of respondents, although older workers tended to report lower work alienation.

Although males ($M = 28.75$, $SD = 8.78$) reported a statistically significant higher level of abusive supervision ($F(1, 879) = 3.79$, $p = .05$) than did females ($M = 27.56$, $SD = 9.25$), the differences were not practically significant. No gender effect existed for perceptions of work alienation. Similarly, respondents' experiences with abusive supervisors ($F(5, 874) = 1.34$, $p = .25$) or work alienation ($F(5, 912) = 1.78$, $p = .11$) did not differ on the basis of race.

Post hoc analyses revealed interesting relationships between experience with education and work alienation. Student status significantly related to work alienation ($F(6, 910) = 10.89$, $p < .01$). Specifically, non-students ($M = 11.04$, $SD = 4.40$) and those attending four-year undergraduate university part time ($M = 10.32$, $SD = 3.66$) reported significantly lower work alienation than did those who attended a four-year undergraduate university full time ($M = 13.64$, $SD = 5.06$). Non-students also reported lower alienation than did those attending two-year undergraduate institutions full time ($M = 13.82$, $SD = 5.92$).

The higher the educational attainment, the lower the work alienation ($F(4, 912) = 9.79$, $p < .01$). In particular, those with graduate degrees reported the lowest alienation ($M = 10.65$, $SD = 4.38$), followed by those holding four-year degrees ($M = 11.29$, $SD = 4.49$), those with some college completed ($M = 12.78$, $SD = 4.97$), and those with a high school diploma ($M = 13.41$, $SD = 5.25$). Overall, no differences existed among those with higher versus lower educational attainment in their experiences of abusive supervision ($F(4, 874) = .410$, $p = .802$). However, we conducted a moderator analysis to determine if educational attainment moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation. As indicated in Table 2, abusive supervision and educational attainment accounted for only 4.71% of the variance in work alienation ($F(3, 865) = 14.24$, $p < .01$), but both were statistically significant predictors. Furthermore, they interacted to explain slightly more variance in work alienation ($\Delta R = .008$, $F(1, 865) = 7.42$, $p < .01$). Figure 1 illustrates this interaction. The effect of abusive supervision on work alienation depends on educational attainment. Although those who have more education experience lower work alienation overall, this group tends to increase in alienation as abusive supervision increases; those with lower education show a slight decrease in work alienation as abusive supervision increases.

TABLE 2
REGRESSION RESULTS FOR EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, ABUSIVE SUPERVISION, AND THE INTERACTION ON WORK ALIENATION

R	R^2	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.2169	.0471	22.04	14.24	3	865	.000
Model	Coeff(b)	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	21.24	2.07	10.24	.000	17.17	25.31
Education	-2.46	.56	-4.38	.000	-3.56	-1.36
Abusive Supervision	-.20	.07	-2.85	.005	-.34	-.06
Interaction	.05	.02	2.72	.007	-.01	.09

FIGURE 1
INTERACTION EFFECT OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT ON WORK ALIENATION
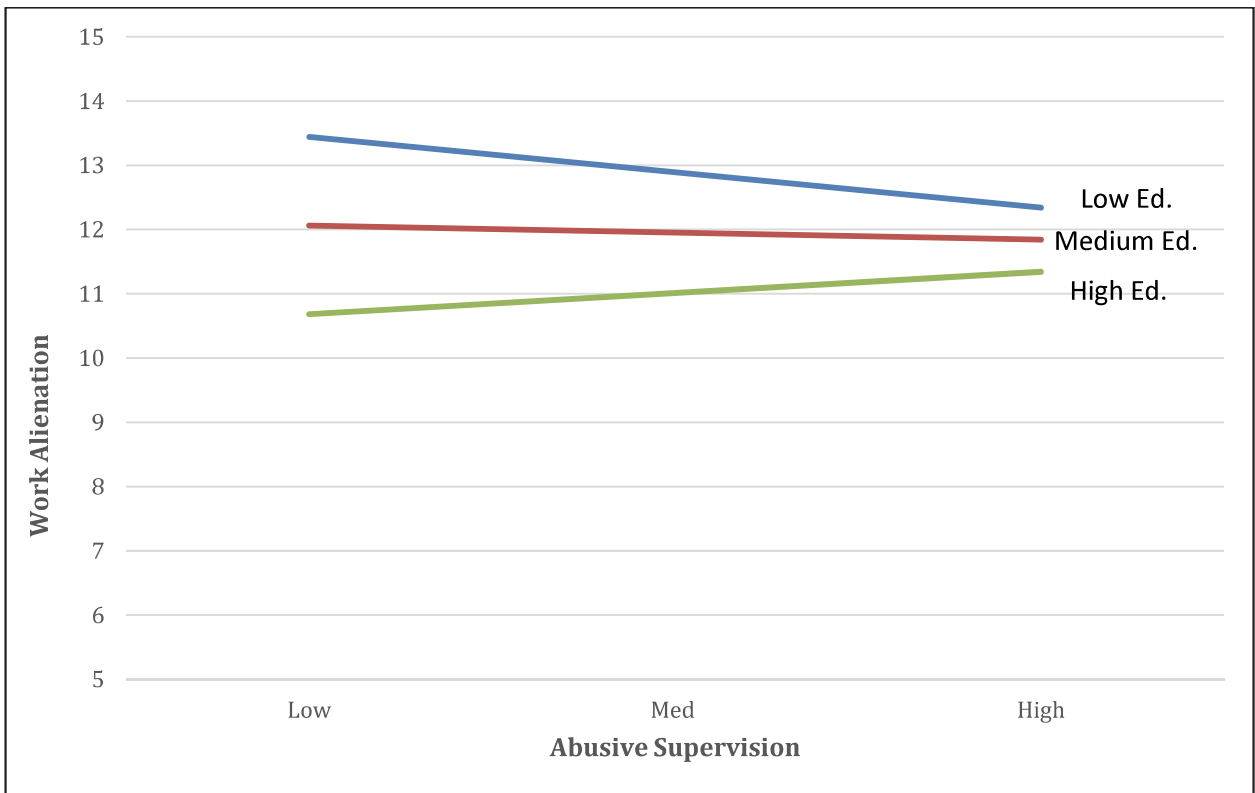
We conducted a stepwise hierarchical regression to examine whether educational experiences predicted work alienation beyond the variance predicted by age. Age predicted work alienation ($R = .286$, $F(1, 903) = 80.719$, $p < .01$). However, educational attainment predicted additional variance ($\Delta R = .010$, $F(2, 902) = 9.60$, $p < .01$). Thus, abusive supervision fails to affect work alienation, but age and educational attainment both predict alienation; as each increases, work alienation decreases.

DISCUSSION

We examined the extent to which exposure to abusive supervision related to work alienation. Our intent was to examine the boundary conditions of abusive supervision and to address the gap in current research on the extent to which abusive supervision exerts lasting effects on subordinates' work perceptions. Although researchers have found that many negative outcomes are associated with abusive supervision, it was not strongly connected to work alienation in our sample. Supervisors may abuse subordinates because the abuse has trickled from above, but we found no evidence that this abuse trickles downs to the employees' perception of and fulfillment in their work. While our results do not eliminate the possibility of abusive supervision having far-reaching effects, we did not find that those who reported more extreme supervisory abuse were any more likely to report alienation from their work. Instead, other factors, such as educational attainment, were stronger predictors of alienation. Several possibilities exist to help explain these findings.

One explanation for our findings relates to leadership substitutes. Leader behavior conceivably influences educated people to a lesser degree because the respondents' professions act as substitutes for leadership (see Kerr & Jermier, 1978). Substitutes reduce the extent to which the subordinate relies on the leader; substitutes include such variables as the subordinate's ability, professional orientation, and intrinsically satisfying work (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). These substitutes have a significantly greater effect on subordinate outcomes than do leader behaviors alone (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996). Our work alienation measure tended toward these types of work features (e.g., "my work is my most rewarding experience"). If substitutes explain our findings, however, one would expect that individuals engaging in work with fewer leadership substitutes would show a stronger relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation. That is, those with limited leadership substitutes would experience a greater impact of negative outcomes from abusive supervision. If we presume that those with lower educational attainment work in roles with fewer leadership substitutes, the findings did not clearly indicate a strong relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation. Those with lower educational attainment tended to experience greater work alienation overall, but those with <u>higher</u> educational attainment were <u>more</u> likely to be influenced negatively by the presence of an abusive supervisor, although the overall effect was weak (see Figure 1). Counter to our expectations, an increase in abusive supervision interacted with educational attainment to result in lower work alienation for those with lower educational attainment; their work alienation was actually lower when they had experienced a higher level of abusive supervision. We cannot determine conclusively if differences in work alienation stem from the presence of an ineffective leader or from other work characteristics. Also, those in lower level positions might have greater support among colleagues (e.g., safety in numbers) or be allied against the common enemy that is the supervisor, thus decreasing the effect of the abusive supervisor. Additional data regarding respondents' organizational level, industry, and features of the work role that could act as substitutes could yield insight into whether certain types of roles (with the presence of leadership substitutes) insulate the respondents from the negative effects of abusive supervision.

Relatedly, based on insights from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), we expected that the extent to which employees' salient needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competency were being met would influence their appraisals of their work. Perhaps other features of the work environment (e.g., supportive co-workers) addressed these needs for work fulfillment and the supervisor is somewhat ignored. Our finding that those with higher educational attainment report lower alienation lends credence to this possibility, in that higher level work might fulfill autonomy and competency needs; future research should directly address this question. Perhaps, given the interaction between educational attainment and abusive supervision, work provides more highly educated people with these buffers against supervision. However, when abusive supervision reaches a critical point, the buffering effects of the work diminish, resulting in the worker experiencing more alienation. We must note, however, that with our sample, abusive supervision and educational attainment explain less than five percent of the variance in work alienation. Practically, there is little effect of either variable on alienation. Although the interaction was

weak, it warrants additional attention, especially in relation to knowledge workers and others who might be more likely to view their work as a central part of their lives.

The finding that older workers were more likely to rate destructive supervisors negatively, but that such workers also reported lower work alienation could be a function of time. Their longer careers afford them enough opportunities for exposure to an abusive supervisor, but the period of time since that exposure could have been much greater than that of the younger workers. Over time, the effect of the abusive supervisor could have eroded. This would be consistent with research finding that only life events during the previous three months influence life satisfaction and affect (Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996). Future research should either control for or measure the length of time between destructive supervisory behaviors and their effects on subordinates. In addition, Diehl and Hay (2010) identified age as a resilience factor in coping with daily stressors. The experiences gathered with age allow for more introspection and provide a greater repertoire of techniques for handling destructive supervisors and avoiding or marginalizing negative outcomes.

It is conceivable that we have the abusive supervision – alienation relationship backward. A lack of work alienation (i.e., greater work fulfillment) could serve as a source of perceived personal control (e.g., Diehl & Hay, 2010) to buffer the effects of abusive supervision. In their study of adults across the lifespan, Diehl and Hay (2010) found that people reported more negative affect on days in which they felt they had less control. Our measure of work alienation measured the extent to which respondents felt that their jobs were rewarding, gave them a feeling of pride, and offered them a chance to do things they like and do well. Perhaps respondents focused more on these fulfilling characteristics of their jobs as means of coping with an unpleasant supervisor. This could account for the insignificant relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation.

Many opportunities exist to expand research on abusive supervision. For example, future work could measure variables in different ways. Perhaps our work alienation items are too self-critical (Banai & Reisel, 2007). To the extent that respondents' work is central to their self-concept, they might resist agreeing that they do not like what they do or that their work is unrewarding. Additional scales defining different forms of destructive leadership and methods of measuring work outcomes could help enhance our understanding of the longer-range effects of negative supervisory behavior.

In addition, future work would benefit from including other moderators and mediators to examine long-range effects of abusive supervision. For example, Tepper (2000) posited that abusive supervision affects subordinates' organizational justice perceptions which then affects their attitudes (e.g., satisfaction, commitment) and behaviors (e.g., turnover). Participants in our study may have left jobs in which they reported to an abusive supervisor. In turn, these departures would eliminate the abuse from the former supervisor, changing the subordinates' perceptions of justice (e.g., new role, supervisor, or organization); thus, the abuse no longer impacted outcomes because the perceived injustice was removed. Additional research on mediators and moderators can help establish a better understanding of whether abusive supervisors affect subordinates long term and, if so, how.

Also, we did not measure the culture of the organizations in which the respondents worked; Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) posit that destructive leadership results from the combination of destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments, which researchers call the "toxic triangle." Padilla, et al. (2007) argue that these connections define destructive leadership. We examined perceptions of leaders, but did not measure the environment or the susceptibility of the followers to such abusive leader actions. Future research could consider long-term effects of abusive supervision within this triangle.

Our initial findings paint a brighter picture for those enduring the discomfort of abusive supervisors. Employees who experience the abuse from a "dark" boss are no more likely than others to sour on their work. However, additional work is needed to examine the extent to which the abusive supervisor undermines other areas of psychological growth and well-being.

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