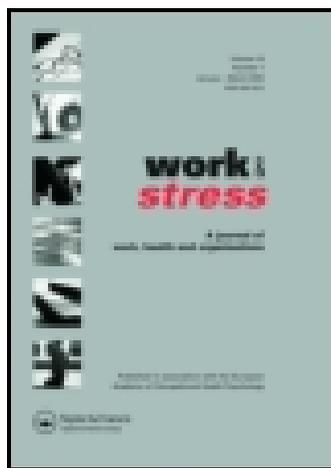


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Work & Stress: An International Journal of Work, Health & Organisations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/twst20>

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Published online: 30 Sep 2014.

To cite this article: Kevin J. Eschleman, Nathan A. Bowling, Jesse S. Michel & Gary N. Burns (2014): Perceived intent of supervisor as a moderator of the relationships between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behaviours, *Work & Stress: An International Journal of Work, Health & Organisations*, DOI: [10.1080/02678373.2014.961183](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2014.961183)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2014.961183>

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Perceived intent of supervisor as a moderator of the relationships between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behaviours

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(Received 17 August 2012; final version accepted 15 August 2014)

This study examined the relationship between perceived intent of supervisors and subordinates' counterproductive responses to abusive supervision. Data were collected in two waves approximately one month apart from 268 full-time employees from the United States and in various occupations. Two forms of perceived intent of abusive supervision were assessed: hostile intent (i.e. abuse believed to be intended to cause harm to the subordinate) and motivational intent (i.e. abuse believed to be intended to motivate good performance from the subordinate). In general, subordinates who reported greater frequency of abusive supervision of both types at Wave 1 were more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviours (CWBs) at Wave 2 than those who reported less abuse. As hypothesized, abusive supervision was more strongly associated with CWBs when perceived hostile intent was high rather than low. Contrary to expectations, abusive supervision was also more strongly associated with CWBs when perceived motivational intent was high rather than low. Our findings show that abuse by supervisors can result in CWBs by subordinates even if those subordinates believe that the abuse is intended to be motivational.

Keywords: abusive supervision; intent; attributions; counterproductive work behaviours; workplace deviance

Introduction

Abusive supervision – the subjective perception of sustained non-physical hostility directed by a supervisor at one or more subordinates – is one form of workplace aggression (Hershcovis, 2011) that has important implications for both individual workers and their employing organizations (Tepper, 2000). Although there is inconsistency in the method of assessment and variability between and within country (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2009), the prevalence of employees being exposed to workplace aggression has been estimated in Austria (8% to 26%), Belgium (3% to 20%), Denmark (2% to 27%), Finland (5% to 24%), France (8% to 10%), Ireland (23%), Norway (5% to 9%), Lithuania (23%), South Africa (20%), Sweden (4%), Turkey (55%), UK (11%) and US (10% to 41%). In addition, the estimated cost resulting from abusive

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supervision to US organizations alone is nearly US\$24 billion dollars annually (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006).

Organizational researchers have demonstrated the importance of several similar constructs that emphasize sustained non-physical supervisor hostility. More specifically, abusive supervision is similar to petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994), victimization (Aquino, 2000), workplace bullying (Hoel & Cooper, 2001), supervisor aggression (Schat, Desmarais, & Kelloway, 2006), supervisor undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002) and negative mentoring experiences (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000). Abusive supervision is distinguished from the aforementioned constructs in that it includes all of the following characteristics: directed downward, excludes physical hostility, does not encompass content other than hostility and does not include reference to intended outcomes (see Tepper, 2000). The growing body of research has found a link between non-physical supervisor hostility and several subordinate outcomes, including negative job attitudes (e.g. Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, & Ensley, 2004), low job performance (e.g. Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007) and increased deviant behaviours (e.g. Tepper et al., 2009). Given these findings, it is important to gain a better understanding of how subordinates respond to abusive supervision so organizations can better minimize the effects of abuse.

Several researchers have suggested that causal attributions play an integral part in how subordinates respond to abusive supervision (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Bowling & Michel, 2011; Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002; Martinko, Gundlach, & Douglas, 2002), but intentionality (the extent to which subordinates believe that their supervisor is purposely abusive) has received much less attention. In the current study, we examine subordinate perceptions of abusive supervision and the perceived intent of this behaviour. A supervisor may engage in abusive supervision with the intent to either harm (hostile intent) a subordinate and/or motivate the subordinate to perform better (motivational intent). For example, a supervisor may ridicule or belittle a subordinate's work in an effort to hurt or embarrass the subordinate. We refer to this as "hostile intent". Similar abusive behaviours by a supervisor may be used as a way to motivate greater effort from subordinates. We refer to this as "motivational intent". We propose that the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate-perpetrated CWBs will depend upon perceived intent of the abusive supervision. Below, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of subordinate reactions to abusive supervision and the potential moderating effects of perceived intent.

Main effects of abusive supervision on CWBs

The effects of abusive supervision on subordinate behaviour are rooted in the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), psychological contracts (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003) and social exchange processes (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). Specifically, a reciprocal exchange occurs between two employees in which resources (e.g. pay and effort) are given and received (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Abusive social exchanges between a supervisor and subordinate are expected to violate fairness of an interpersonal exchange, and thus damage the psychological contract between supervisor and subordinate. Subordinates exposed to favourable work interactions should adjust their performance behaviours, job attitudes and other positive criteria upward, whereas individuals exposed to unfavourable work interactions (i.e. experiences of abusive supervision) should adjust their performance behaviours, job attitudes and other criteria downward (Tepper, 2000). We predict that one way in which subordinates may adjust their behaviour downward

is by engaging in counterproductive work behaviours (CWBs; Wei & Sei, 2013). CWBs include any actions that employees engage in that harm their organization or the members of the organization (e.g. supervisor). Examples of CWBs include theft, sabotage, withdrawal behaviour and harassment (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Consistent with the above theorizing, research has indeed found a positive relationship between exposure to abusive supervision and subordinates' CWBs (e.g. Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper et al., 2009). For example, abusive supervision correlated .44 with CWBs directed at the supervisor and .36 with CWBs directed at the organization (Tepper et al., 2009). As a result, we predict that abusive supervision will be positively associated with CWBs directed at one's supervisor and at the organization.

Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision will be positively associated with CWBs.

Interactive effects of intent attributions and abusive supervision on CWBs

Although employees are generally expected to respond to abusive supervision with retaliatory behaviours, there is likely variability in subordinates' responses. More specifically, a subordinate's beliefs about why abusive supervision occurred are likely to influence the degree to which a psychological contract is violated and, in turn, the behavioural response of the subordinate. An employee's explanations for why a behaviour has occurred are referred to as causal attributions (Kent & Martinko, 1995). The theoretical importance of worker attributions is apparent within several conceptual models of abusive behaviour (e.g. Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Douglas et al., 2008; Martinko et al., 2002). For instance, Bowling and Beehr (2006) suggest victims make attributions regarding the cause of harassment, which can include themselves, the supervisor or the organization. In turn, these attributions are likely to influence the victims' reactions to harassment (e.g. quit their job or report the event). Together, these models suggest that employees may have a specific negative emotional reaction to a trigger event (e.g. supervisor abuse), but the emotional reaction is partially dependent upon attributions of intent.

Intent is the perceived motivational state of the actor (Kent & Martinko, 1995). It is important to note that the aforementioned models do not distinguish between different types of intent. The possible dimensions of intentionality vary depending upon the type of interpersonal behaviour being provided, but can generally be categorized as the behaviour being conducted in the interest of either the actor or in the interest of the recipient/victim. Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) describe intention dimensions similarly in that a subordinate will perceive that a supervisor is behaving with the intent to either use the employee for self-serving purposes or facilitate the subordinate's professional development.

The distinction between different forms of intent of abusive supervision is similar to the distinction between hostile and instrumental aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1997). Hostile aggression includes the intent to harm, whereas instrumental aggression is driven by additional goals beyond harm. In other words, instrumental aggression has a functional use – it involves the use of aggression to accomplish an end beyond simply harming the victim. In the current study, we examine hostile intent, which occurs when the subordinate believes that the supervisor is abusive because he/she wants to harm the subordinate. We also examine motivational intent, which is a narrow focus of instrumental aggression because the additional goal is to improve performance. Motivational intent occurs when the subordinate believes that the supervisor is abusive because he/she is trying to

encourage the subordinate to be a better performer. A drill sergeant, for example, may verbally embarrass a struggling cadet in an effort to “light a fire under him/her” and hence improve the cadet’s performance. Abusive supervision with motivational intent may be considered a viable option by many supervisors, given that employees respond to consequences (i.e. Expectancy Theory; Van Earde & Thierry, 1996). If this approach is shared by the subordinate, they may believe that the supervisor is engaging in abusive treatment in order to direct their behaviour.

The potentially positive effects of motivational intent of abusive supervision have some overlap with the notion of “tough love” that has emerged in the counselling (e.g. Burns & Peyrot, 2003), education/mentoring (e.g. Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, & Burgin, 2012), coaching (e.g. Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2010) and criminal justice literatures (e.g. Perelman & Clements, 2009). Although the positive effects of tough love are debated and have not fully been explored empirically, some research has found positive effects among specific populations and contexts. Coaches of top athletes, for example, were described as challenging the athletes by appealing to negative emotions (i.e. anger; Hassell et al., 2010). Although initially upset by the motivational abusive approach, the majority of athletes reported that the approach was effective. Similarly, boot camp interventions with abusive verbal instructions for troubled youth were generally rated as effective (Perelman & Clements, 2009).

To better understand how intent may moderate the relationships between abusive supervision and CWB, it is important to note that hostile and motivational intent are not opposites. In fact, a supervisor’s behaviour may be driven by multiple intentions. As a result, we define hostile and motivational intent as conceptually distinct constructs. That is, it is possible for an employee to perceive a supervisor’s behaviours to simultaneously reflect either both or neither form of intent.

To illustrate how hostile and motivational intent may differentially affect the relationships between abusive supervision and CWBs, we return to our discussion of psychological contract violations between a supervisor and subordinate. In reference to abusive supervision, hostile intent may be indicative of not holding the subordinates interests as important whereas motivational intent may be indicative of holding the subordinates interests as important. Thus, when an abusive social exchange is deemed as a hostile act, violations of the psychological contract and a perceived unfairness in the interpersonal exchange might occur. Conversely, if an abusive exchange is deemed as a motivational act, the psychological contract may be upheld because a perceived unfairness in the interpersonal exchange does not occur. As a result, we expect abusive supervision to have a stronger relationship with retaliatory responses (i.e. subordinate-perpetrated CWBs) when a subordinate believes the abuse is a reflection of hostile intent. In addition, we expect abusive supervision to have a weaker relationship with retaliatory responses when a subordinate believes the abuse is given with motivational intent.

Hypothesis 2: Hostile intent will moderate the relationships between abusive supervision and CWBs. Specifically, abusive supervision will be more strongly associated with CWBs among subordinates who perceive high hostile intent than among subordinates who perceive low hostile intent.

Hypothesis 3: Motivational intent will moderate the relationships between abusive supervision and CWBs. Specifically, abusive supervision will be less strongly associated with CWBs among subordinates who perceive high motivational intent than among subordinates who perceive low motivational intent.

Method

Data collection and participants

Participants were recruited using StudyResponse (The StudyResponse Project, n.d.). The StudyResponse database consists of over 80,000 people from the United States who are willing to be participants in online questionnaire-based research and has been used to recruit participants in several published studies (e.g. Judge, Ilies, & Scott, 2006). In the current study, participants were compensated with up to two \$5 gift cards to an online store. Compensation was provided after the completion of the questionnaire at Wave 1 and Wave 2. Data were collected in two waves separated by approximately one month in an effort to minimize the effects of common method variance (see Podsakoff, MacKensie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). We specifically chose a one-month time lag because it should be sufficiently long to avoid biasing effects of occasional factors (e.g. the mood one happens to be in at the time of survey completion), but at the same time not so long as to result in excessively high levels of participant attrition. Our multi-wave design, however, does not allow us to model temporal change because no variables were measured at multiple time points. Nor is one month an adequate duration to expect change in many psychological processes (Ford et al., 2014). The predictor and moderator data were collected in Wave 1 and the criterion data were collected in Wave 2.

Participants were removed from the sample if they had worked less than 20 hours per week, had less than one year job tenure or experienced a change in supervisor, position or organization between data collection waves. This was done to ensure that participants had an adequate amount of time to develop a relationship with their immediate supervisor. In addition, we included four dummy items in each wave of data collection (eight in total) that instructed participants to select a specific response (e.g. “strongly disagree”) in an effort to identify careless responding (see Huang, Curran, Keeney, Poposki, & DeShon, 2012; Meade & Craig, 2012). Only participants who correctly answered all eight dummy items across the two waves were included in our analyses. Wave 1 included 514 participants and Wave 2 included 340 responses. The final sample size included 268 (response rate of 52%) participants who provided complete data for both time points and met the study requirements. Participants in the final sample were on average 37 years old, 50% female and 81% Caucasian. Participants held a wide variety of occupations (e.g. administration support, managerial, education), worked an average of 42 hours per week, and had an average of nine years job tenure.

Measures

Abusive supervision. Abusive supervision was assessed in the Wave 1 questionnaire using an abbreviated version (average of five items) of Tepper’s (2000) scale (the original scale consisted of 20 items). These five items were identified by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) as measuring active-aggressive abusive supervision and had the strongest factor loadings of Tepper’s original measure. Example items ask how often one’s supervisor “ridicules me” and “puts me down in front of others”. Each item was assessed on a five-point scale from (1) “never” to (5) “very often”. The abusive supervision scale yielded an internal consistency reliability of .93.

Intent attributions. Measures of hostile and motivational intent were written specifically for the current study. Pools of 20 items for each variable were piloted with a sample of 115 employed undergraduates who worked an average of 25 hours per week. Item-total

correlations were used to identify which items would yield reliable measures. Hostile and motivational intent were assessed in the Wave 1 questionnaire using the average of five items for each measure. Participants were instructed to “Imagine the following behaviour is happening to you. Each statement is a potential explanation of this behaviour. Please indicate your agreement.” Response options were on a seven-point scale from (1) “*strongly disagree*” to (7) “*strongly agree*”. The hypothetical behaviours that participants were asked to consider were consistent with the behaviours listed in the abusive supervision scale.

The items used to assess *hostile intent* yielded an internal consistency reliability of .96 and included the following statements: (i) “If my supervisor were to ridicule me, it would be because he/she would be trying to hurt my feelings”, (ii) “If my supervisor were to tell me my thoughts or feelings were stupid, it would be because he/she would be trying to harm me”, (iii) “If my supervisor were to put me down in front of others, it would be because he/she would be trying to hurt my feelings”, (iv) “If my supervisor were to tell me I’m incompetent, it would be because he/she would be trying to harm me” and (v) “If my supervisor were to make negative comments about me to others, it would be because he/she would be trying to hurt my feelings”.

The items used to assess *motivational intent* yielded an internal consistency reliability of .95 and included the following statements: (i) “If my supervisor were to ridicule me, it would be because he/she would be trying to light a fire under me to work harder”, (ii) “If my supervisor were to tell me my thoughts or feelings were stupid, it would be because he/she would be trying to motivate me to work harder”, (iii) “If my supervisor were to put me down in front of others, it would be because he/she would be trying to light a fire under me to work harder”, (iv) “If my supervisor were to tell me I’m incompetent, it would be because he/she would be trying to motivate me to work harder” and (v) “If my supervisor were to make negative comments about me to others, it would be because he/she would be trying to light a fire under me to work harder”.

Counterproductive work behaviours. CWBs were assessed in the Wave 2 questionnaire. We used the average score of nine items to assess CWBs directed at the supervisor (CWB-Ss; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007) and 10 items to assess CWBs directed at the organization (CWB-Os; Bennett & Robinson, 2000). We instructed participants to indicate how often they engage in each CWB on a five-point scale from (1) “*rarely*” to (5) “*very often*”. A sample CWB-S item is “Made fun of your supervisor at work” and a sample CWB-O item is “Put little effort into your work”. The CWB-Ss and CWB-Os scales yielded internal consistency reliabilities of .96 and .94, respectively.

Demographics. Participants were asked to report their age and gender (male = 1; female = 2).

Results

Relationship between abusive supervision, perceived intent and CWBs

The descriptive statistics, correlations and internal consistency reliabilities for all of the study variables are reported in Table 1. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, abusive supervision was positively associated with both CWB-Os ($r = .48, p < .01$) and CWB-Ss ($r = .45, p < .01$). It is also interesting to note that abusive supervision was positively associated with both types of perceived intent: hostile ($r = .22, p < .01$) and motivational ($r = .25, p < .01$). Hostile intent and motivational intent were also positively associated with each other ($r = .19, p < .01$), although this relationship was modest. Given these findings,

Table 1. Correlations and descriptive statistics for the study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Wave 1									
1. Abusive Supervision	1.30	0.67	(.93)						
2. Hostile Intent	3.57	1.92	.22**	(.96)					
3. Motivational Intent	3.08	1.65	.25**	.19**	(.95)				
Wave 2									
4. CWB-Os	1.34	0.57	.48**	.20**	.30**	(.94)			
5. CWB-Ss	1.20	0.55	.45**	.20**	.31**	.79**	(.96)		
Demographics									
6. Age	37.12	11.17	-.07	.08	-.17**	-.20**	-.15*	-	
7. Gender	1.50	0.50	-.17**	.04	-.16**	-.13*	-.14*	-.07	-

Notes: $N = 268$. CWB-Os = counterproductive work behaviours directed at the organization. CWB-Ss = counterproductive work behaviours directed at the supervisor. Male = 1, Female = 2.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

abusive supervision, hostile intent and motivational intent are largely distinct from each other. Similarly, a three-factor confirmatory factor analysis model with separate latent factors for abusive supervision, hostile intent and motivational intent yielded an excellent fit ($\chi^2(24, N = 268) = 49.11, p < .01$, Comparative Fit Index = .99, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual = .03).

Attributions as moderators of the relationships between abusive supervision and CWBs

We used hierarchical moderated regression with mean-centred predictors to test for interactive effects of intent attributions and abusive supervision on CWBs (Aiken & West, 1991). Age and gender were included in the analyses as control variables. We conducted follow-up analyses of each significant interaction using Aiken and West's (1991) method. Specifically, we created a graphical display of the relationship between abusive supervision and CWBs for high (+1 standard deviation) and low (-1 standard deviation) values of the intent attributions.

We found support for Hypothesis 2, which predicted that hostile intent would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and CWBs; that is, that abusive supervision would be more strongly associated with CWBs among subordinates who perceived high hostile intent than among those who perceived low hostile intent (see Table 2). Specifically, the abusive supervision x hostile intent interaction term explained an additional 3% of the variance in CWB-Os ($\Delta R^2 = .03, p < .01$) and 2% of the variance in CWB-Ss ($\Delta R^2 = .02, p < .01$). Follow-up analyses indicated that the relationships between abusive supervision and both CWB-Os (Figure 1) and CWB-Ss were in the expected direction. The moderating effect of hostile intent on the relationship between abusive supervision and CWB-Ss was very similar to the interaction effect presented in Figure 1. For brevity, an illustration of this interaction is not presented here but can be obtained upon request from the first author. To summarize, hostile intent did moderate the relationships between abusive supervision and CWBs in the hypothesized direction.

We did not find support for Hypothesis 3, however, which predicted that motivational intent would attenuate the relationship between abusive supervision and CWBs (see Table 3). The motivational intent x abusive supervision interaction term explained an

Table 2. Moderating effects of hostile intent and abusive supervision on CWBs.

Criterion	Predictors	β	ΔR^2
CWB-Os	1. Age	-.17**	
	Gender	-.06	
	Abusive Supervision (A)	.25**	
	Hostile Intent (B)	.14*	
	Motivational Intent (C)	.16**	.29**
	2. A \times B	.22**	.03**
CWB-Ss	1. Age	-.11*	
	Gender	-.06	
	Abusive Supervision (A)	.25**	
	Hostile Intent (B)	.13*	
	Motivational Intent (C)	.18**	.26**
	2. A \times B	.18*	.02**

Notes: $N = 268$. B = standardized regression coefficients with all variables included. CWB-Os = counterproductive work behaviours directed at the organization. CWB-Ss = counterproductive work behaviours directed at the supervisor.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

additional 6% of the variance in CWB-Os ($\Delta R^2 = .06$, $p < .01$) and 5% of the variance in CWB-Ss ($\Delta R^2 = .05$, $p < .01$). However, follow-up analyses indicate that the relationships between abusive supervision and both CWB-Os (Figure 2) and CWB-Ss were *stronger* when subordinates perceive high rather than low levels of motivational intent. The moderating effect of motivational intent on the relationship between abusive supervision and CWB-Ss was very similar to the interaction effect presented in Figure 2. For brevity, this interaction is not presented here but can be obtained upon request from the first author. In sum, motivational intent did moderate the relationships between abusive supervision and CWBs, but the interactions were not in the expected direction.

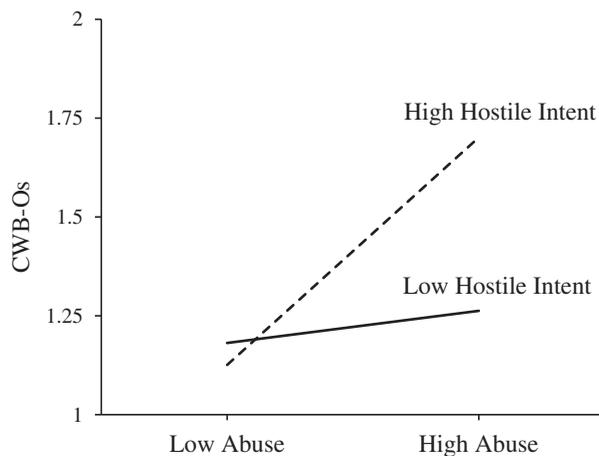


Figure 1. The moderating effect of perceived hostile intent on the relationship between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behaviours directed at the organization. (CWB-Os).

Table 3. Moderating effects of motivational intent and abusive supervision on CWBs.

Criterion	Predictors	β	ΔR^2
CWB-Os	1. Age	-.16**	
	Gender	-.04	
	Abusive Supervision (A)	.23**	
	Hostile Intent (B)	.12*	
	Motivational Intent (C)	.16**	.29**
	2. A \times C	.30**	.06**
CWB-Ss	1. Age	-.11*	
	Gender	-.04	
	Abusive Supervision (A)	.21**	
	Hostile Intent (B)	.12*	
	Motivational Intent (C)	.18**	.26**
	2. A \times C	.26**	.05**

Notes: $N = 268$. β = standardized regression coefficients with all variables included. CWB-Os = counterproductive work behaviours directed at the organization. CWB-Ss = counterproductive work behaviours directed at the supervisor.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

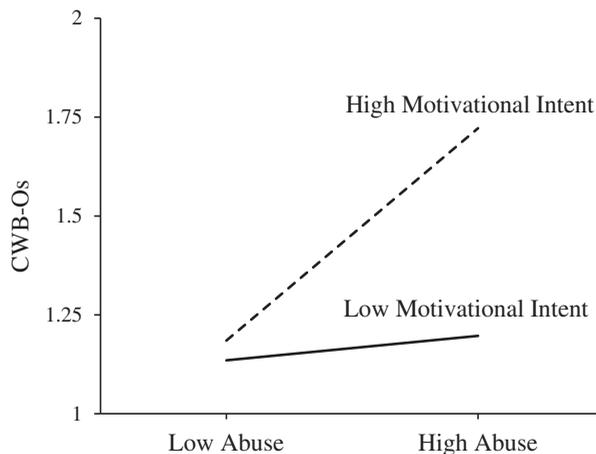


Figure 2. The moderating effect of perceived motivational intent on the relationship between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behaviours directed at the organization. (CWB-Os).

Discussion

Relationship between abusive supervision and CWBs

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, abusive supervision was positively associated with both CWB-Os and CWB-Ss. These relationships – which are consistent with past research findings (e.g. Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper et al., 2009) – may have occurred because the presence of abusive supervision causes subordinates to experience a violation in the reciprocal exchange of resources (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). As a result, abusive supervision is likely to lead to retaliatory behaviours, such as CWBs (Wei & Si, 2013).

Attributions as moderators of the relationships between abusive supervision and CWBs

We also examined subordinates' perceptions of supervisor intent as moderators of the abusive supervision–CWBs relationship. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, abusive supervision was more strongly associated with CWBs when perceived hostile intent was high rather than low. This finding may have occurred because hostile intent violates the subordinate's psychological contract with the supervisor (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Similarly, perceptions of motivational intent influenced the strength of the abusive supervision–CWB relationship. The direction of this latter interaction was contrary to Hypothesis 3, however, with abusive supervision being more strongly associated with CWBs when perceived motivational intent was high rather than low.

Although the moderating effects of motivational intent were in the opposite direction than expected, there are plausible explanations for this finding. Subordinates who perceive a high level of motivational intent may feel as though they are being used or treated like objects, which could lead to a violation of the psychological contract between the supervisor and subordinate. In addition, the subordinate may also use the intentional abusive behaviour to make inferences about the behaviours that are acceptable in the organization. More specifically, intentional behaviours by a supervisor are likely to send an implicit message to the subordinate that abuse and deviant behaviours are acceptable within their organization. As a result, abusive supervision that is believed to be motivational may cause a subordinate to engage in CWBs as a method to facilitate change within their work environment (Bowling & Eschleman, 2010; Martinko et al., 2002).

Practical implications

The findings of this study have several implications for impression management training within organizations. Perceptions of both hostile intent and motivational intent were positively related to CWBs. This indicates that the potential consequence of motivating subordinates through abusive behaviours may have harmful consequences. Given that CWBs are often performed outside the awareness of a supervisor and organization (Spector et al., 2006), an abusive supervisor who sees the immediate positive results of his or her behaviour may be oblivious to the fact that subordinates are engaging in CWBs as a result of his or her abuse.

In addition, the results have potential implications for conflict management, because subordinates may model the behaviours of supervisors, who may be considered role models of acceptable organizational behaviour (e.g. Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Weiss, 1977). Organizations should be cautious in making inferences regarding the intent of abusive behaviours, whether the intent is hostile or motivational. For example, organizations or conflict managers may attempt to placate an angry subordinate who was recently abused by describing the supervisor as having good, but probably misguided, intentions. This justification of abusive supervision may lead to increases in CWBs.

Limitations and future research

We should note a few limitations of the current research. First, our findings may be vulnerable to the effects of common method variance because all of the data were collected using self-reports. Some authors, however, have suggested that the problem of common method variance is generally overstated (Spector, 2006). Several reasons lead us to believe that common method bias is indeed a minor limitation in the current study. First, the anonymous nature of the data collection likely limited the effects of socially

desirable responding. Second, we attempted to minimize the effects of common method variance and potentially inflated correlations by using a two-wave design (see Podsakoff et al., 2003). Finally, our key hypotheses addressed moderator effects, and prior research has shown that common method variance generally makes it more difficult to detect moderator effects (Evans, 1985; Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010).

The current study is also limited in drawing definitive causal conclusions because our use of non-longitudinal data and a non-experimental research design. Although two waves of data were collected, no study variables were assessed at multiple time points. Longitudinal data in which every variables is assessed at every time point is needed to examine whether intent attributions of abusive supervision increase the frequency of engaging in CWBs over time. It should be noted that given the nature of the current research topic, an experimental design is impractical because ethical and logistical constraints prevent the manipulation of abusive supervision. Instead, future research should consider using experience sampling methods (Fisher & To, 2012; Hormuth, 1986) to capture more accurate real-time processes related to the attribution phenomena. Such designs would allow researchers to evaluate attributions toward specific abusive events. A longitudinal design would also enable researchers to assess the role of intent on potential mediating processes involved in the abusive supervision – CWB relationship. Abusive supervision may lead to specific negative emotions, for example, which result in an increase in CWBs (Spector & Fox, 2002). Intent or type of intent may influence the type of emotional response (e.g. frustration, anger) to abusive supervision.

Further research is needed to examine the role that perceived intent plays in responses to other types of abusive behaviour. Although the current study examined abuse perpetrated by supervisors, other potential sources of abusive behaviour exist within the workplace, including co-workers, subordinates and customers. Research attention should be given to whether or not the current findings are present when the abuse perpetrator is someone other than a supervisor.

The current research focused specifically on CWBs as a consequence of abuse. Perhaps perceived intentions impact the relationships between abuse and other employee outcomes. Abuse, for example, might yield an especially strong relationship with negative attitudes toward the perpetrator and the organization, withdrawal behaviour (e.g. absenteeism, turnover) and job dissatisfaction when the target believes that the abuse is intentional.

Finally, research should examine the potential predictors of perceived intentions of abuse. For example, we expect that targets are more likely to believe that abuse is intentional when the perpetrator repeatedly engages in abuse over an extended period of time and when the abuse is especially severe. Abusive behaviour might also be perceived as intentional whenever the perpetrator has bragged about his or her abusive behaviour and when a perpetrator continues to be abusive even after being confronted about his or her behaviour.

Summary

In general, the negative relationship between abusive supervision and CWBs was dependent upon the subordinate's perceived intentions. Specifically, subordinates who reported greater frequency of abusive supervision were more likely to report engaging in CWBs when the frequency of abuse with perceived hostile intent was high rather than low. Similarly, but contrary to expectations, abusive supervision was also more strongly

associated with CWBs when the frequency of abuse with perceived motivational intent was high. In sum, it seems that perceptions of the intent of abuse by supervisors are related to subordinates' tendency to engage in CWBs, even if those subordinates believe that the abuse is intended to be motivational.

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