

# HOLDING ABUSIVE MANAGERS IN CONTEMPT: WHY AND WHEN ABUSIVE SUPERVISION BEGETS INTERPERSONAL JUSTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

While the conventional literature on abusive supervision has mainly focused on the interaction between supervisors and their non-managerial subordinates, recent research has shifted its attention to the interaction between supervisors and their managerial subordinates. Largely drawn on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), this line of research has found the trickle-down effect of abusive supervision from higher-level managers to supervisors (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012; Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012). These research holds an implicit assumption that employees are likely to learn behaviors displayed by their work role models, such as their immediate supervisors, regardless of the nature of such behaviors. While the trickle-down effects of unethical and aggressive behaviors have been documented in numerous studies, this assumption was recently challenged by research which raised doubt about the social learning effect in abusive supervision (Taylor et al., 2019; Tu et al., 2018). Recent findings suggest that individuals are more agentic in determining whether to learn certain behaviors or not, especially when such behaviors violate moral standards, and point to a *cognitive* explanation for when the abusive cycle might be broken.

Joining this line of research to emphasize the agentic role of the abused victims, our study takes a step further to argue that not only would the abusive cycle be broken at times (that is, experienced abusive supervision does not result in higher enacted abusive supervision), being abused by managers might also trigger supervisors' negative *emotional* reaction, which guides them to interact with their subordinates in a way that is in contrast to how they are treated by their managers. Our premise is that being abused by superiors is a disturbing affective event one might experience at work (Matta, Erol-Korkamaz, Johnson, & Bicaksiz, 2014; Simon, Hurst, Kelley, & Judge, 2015; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). While prior research has identified several negative emotions in reaction to abusive supervision, such as anger, fear, and shame (Chan & McAllister, 2014; Oh & Farh, 2017; Peng, Schaubroeck, Chong, & Li, 2019), our study focuses on contempt, an other-condemning moral emotion, which may motivate supervisors to interact with their subordinates in a civil manner, as opposite to an abusive manner.

Drawing on affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and the social function of contempt (Fischer & Roseman, 2007), we propose an emotional mechanism (i.e., contempt) linking abusive manager behavior (or supervisors' experienced abusive supervision) and supervisor interpersonal justice toward subordinate (or supervisors' enacted interpersonal justice

toward subordinates). Specifically, supervisors may feel contempt of their managers after being abused, because they consider themselves morally superior to their abusive managers whose behaviors violate moral standards (Melwani & Barsade, 2011). The feeling of contempt further motivates supervisors to distance themselves from their abusive managers (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). As a type of interpersonal distancing, abused supervisors might morally differentiate themselves from their abusive managers (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2011), and interact with subordinates in a civil way by demonstrating higher interpersonal justice.

Moreover, we theorize that the indirect relationship between abusive manager behavior and interpersonal justice toward subordinates via contempt would be more pronounced among supervisors with higher moral attentiveness, defined as “the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences” (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028). Individuals with higher moral attentiveness are more sensitive and reactive to moral-related issues and use higher moral standards to monitor their own behavior. Therefore, they are more likely to morally and behaviorally differentiate themselves from their abusive managers. Taken together, we propose a moderated mediation model, where supervisor moral attentiveness enhances the indirect effect of abusive manager behavior on interpersonal justice toward subordinate through contempt.

## THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Affective events theory (AET) posits that workplace events stimulate emotional reactions, which in turn influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Unlike research that only focused on the valence of affective experiences (i.e., positive vs. negative), AET argues that people may experience a specific/discrete emotion in response to a certain event and different emotional reactions may result in different behavioral consequences. In the work environment, leaders are often viewed as the architects of affective events for subordinates (Dasborough, 2006). Being abused by supervisors is certainly an unpleasant experience, eliciting negative affect in followers (Hoobler & Hu, 2013).

Among the negative discrete emotions, contempt is a common moral emotion emerging from negative social interactions. Observing the violation of community ethics, such as when one fails to fulfill his/her role obligation and duties within the community, gives rise to the feeling of contempt (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Specific to the leadership context, we argue that abusive supervision could be the potential antecedent that induces contempt among subordinates. Being abused by managers could be a negative affective event inducing supervisors' feelings of contempt because abused supervisors might consider abusive manager behavior unethical and their managers ineffective as the abusive managers fail to carry out their duties as leaders and supervisors. Therefore, we propose,

*Hypothesis 1: Abusive manager behavior is positively related to supervisor contempt.*

The experience of moral emotion may trigger the moral reasoning process that helps individuals to distinguish between ethical and unethical behaviors and shapes their subsequent behaviors (Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014). From a social functional perspective, contempt serves a social-distancing function which motivates individuals to undergo moral reasoning process and draw a clear self-target distinction by ignoring or excluding those who are ineffective or unethical from one's social network (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Research has clearly evidenced

the social-distancing function of contempt. It logically follows that abused supervisors might distance themselves from their abusive managers due to the feeling of contempt. However, in practices, due to work interdependency and power differences, it is unrealistic for abused supervisors to ostracize their abusive managers at work.

Unlike the forms of social distancing mentioned above, moral differentiation, another strategy of interpersonal distancing, is more likely to be an effective way for abused supervisors to create psychological distance and differentiation with their abusive managers. Moral differentiation refers to a process when individuals differentiate themselves from the perpetrators (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2011). Contempt is likely to result in moral differentiation, which motivates individuals to enact ethical behavior as opposed to unethical behavior demonstrated by the target of contempt. In our study context, we consider interpersonal justice, which reflects the extent to which supervisors treat their subordinates with dignity and respect (Colquitt, 2001), as an ethical behavior in reaction to contempt caused by experienced abusive supervision. In other words, abused supervisors may choose to enact interpersonal justice toward subordinates, in order to behaviorally demonstrate that they are morally different from their abusive managers. Taken together, our arguments above depict an emotional mechanism of a moral differentiation effect, in contrast to a social learning effect, that supervisors who are abused by managers are likely to treat their subordinates with more respect and dignity due to their feelings of contempt of abusive managers. Thus, we propose,

*Hypothesis 2: There is a positive indirect relationship between abusive manager behavior and supervisor interpersonal justice toward subordinate via supervisor contempt.*

While the feeling of contempt may drive supervisors who were abused by their managers to treat subordinates in a more civil way - a moral differentiation effect as discussed above, we further argue that some supervisors are more likely than others to morally differentiate themselves from their abusive managers by treating subordinates politely and respectfully, because moral differentiation involves a process of moral reasoning which is triggered by the feeling of contempt, guides behavioral changes, and requires individuals to overcome the power of social influence to behave in a civil way (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2011). One prerequisite for moral differentiation to occur is that individuals should recognize the moral elements embedded in their experiences and actions, and would actively engage in moral reasoning about their subsequent actions. A related construct describing such a tendency is moral attentiveness.

Moral attentiveness is a trait-like characteristic to describe individuals' chronic tendency to perceive and consider morality in their experiences (Reynolds, 2008). Research has demonstrated that individuals at high levels of moral attentiveness react differently to morality-related behaviors because they are more attentive to moral cues. For example, van Gils et al. (2015) found that morally attentive employees were more likely to reduce their unethical behavior when they worked with an ethical leader. Similarly, we argue that the moral differentiation effect (i.e., contempt resulting in supervisor enacted interpersonal justice) is more pronounced among supervisors with higher moral attentiveness. Individuals higher in moral attentiveness, compared to their less morally attentive counterparts, are more capable of imagining the impact of their actions on others and generating alternative options that take others' concern into account (Whitaker & Godwin, 2013). Therefore, morally attentive supervisors are more likely to treat subordinates differently from how they are treated by their managers, as a way to morally differentiate themselves from their abusive managers. Thus, we

proposed,

*Hypothesis 3: Supervisor moral attentiveness moderates the indirect relationship between abusive manager behavior and interpersonal justice toward subordinate via supervisor contempt, such that the positive indirect relationship is stronger among supervisors with higher moral attentiveness, compared to those with lower moral attentiveness.*

## STUDY 1: METHOD

### Sample and Procedure

Supervisor-subordinate dyads from hotels located in southern China were recruited. Flyers which contained the basic information regarding our study, along with an invitation letter ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation, were distributed to 260 hotel supervisors. Upon receiving consent from supervisors, packages of surveys were sent to these supervisors by one of the authors. Included in the package were a detailed description of the study for both supervisors and subordinates, one set of questionnaire for supervisors, the other for subordinates, two postage-paid return envelopes, and two vouchers worth MOP25 (around US\$3) each as a token of appreciation. Supervisors were informed to pass the subordinate survey together with the study instruction, return envelope, and voucher to one of their subordinates. To avoid selection bias, supervisors were instructed to pass the subordinate survey to the first immediate subordinate whom they would meet the workday after they received the survey package. Both supervisors and subordinates were required to mail the completed surveys individually to the researchers using the preaddressed return envelopes. Of the 260 survey packages distributed, 235 supervisor-subordinate dyads were returned and matched for an effective response rate of 90%.

### Measures

**Supervisor moral attentiveness.** Supervisors' moral attentiveness was measured with a 5-item scale developed by Reynolds (2008). Supervisors were required to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed on five statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .84.

**Abusive manager behavior.** Abusive manager behavior was assessed by a shortened version of Tepper's (2000) abusive supervision scale. Supervisors were asked to rate the frequency of them experiencing abusive supervision from their managers on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .89.

**Supervisor contempt.** We adopted the 8-item scale developed by Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002). Supervisors were asked to rate how often they felt each of the eight emotions when they interacted with their managers at work: anger, disgusted, hateful, contemptuous, ashamed, frustrated, resentful, and uneasy. A five-point Likert scale was used (1 = never, 5 = very often). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .95.

**Interpersonal justice toward subordinate.** Interpersonal justice was assessed with two items previously used by Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005). Subordinates were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements describing their supervisors' behaviors toward subordinates in their work groups on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .90.

Control variable. We controlled for the effects of supervisor ego depletion ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and subordinate's LMX ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

## STUDY 1: RESULTS

Confirmatory factor analyses results indicated that the fit of the hypothesized four-factor model was acceptable. We employed Mplus 7.0 to test all the hypotheses in two path-analytic models (i.e., a mediation-only model and a moderated mediation model). Hypothesis 1 which posited a positive relationship abusive manager behavior and supervisor contempt, was supported ( $b = .85, p < .01$ ). We tested the indirect effect using Monte Carlo simulation with 20000 replications to construct the sampling distribution of the indirect effects (Selig & Preacher, 2008). Results failed to support an indirect effect of abusive manager behavior on interpersonal justice toward subordinate through supervisor contempt (indirect effect = 0.06, 95%CI: [-0.03, 0.16]). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Hypothesis 3 predicted a conditional indirect effect of moral attentiveness moderating the aforementioned indirect relationship. We found a significant interaction between supervisor contempt and supervisor moral attentiveness in predicting interpersonal justice toward subordinates ( $b = .12, p < .05$ ). Results of simple slope analysis showed that the positive relationship between supervisor contempt and interpersonal justice toward subordinate was only found among supervisors with higher moral attentiveness (simple slope = .16,  $p < .05$ ), but not among supervisors with lower moral attentiveness (simple slope = -.02, ns). Through Monte Carlo simulation, we found a significant positive indirect effect of abusive manager behavior on interpersonal justice toward subordinate via supervisor contempt only among supervisors who were more morally attentive, but not among supervisors who were less morally attentive. Taken together, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

## STUDY 2: METHOD

We recruited 125 participants, who held a supervisory position at the time of survey, through Prolific Academic. To ensure that participants are qualified for our study, we only recruited participants who had a direct manager they reported to, had opportunities to interact with their subordinates on a daily basis, and would work in office on days when we administered the surveys. We followed the paradigm used by Lin, Ma, and Johnson (2016) and administered three surveys at three time points. At time 1, participants were required to complete Survey 1 on a weekend, in which we measured supervisors' demographic information, baseline levels of supervisor contempt, relational disidentification, interpersonal justice toward subordinate, and moral attentiveness. Survey 2, which was sent to the participants at 4:00PM of the subsequent Monday and closed at midnight, measured abusive manager behavior and contempt supervisors experienced that day. Survey 3, which was sent to the participants at 4:00PM on the Tuesday that followed, measured interpersonal justice toward subordinate that day. A total of 107 participants completed all three surveys (i.e., for an 85.6% response rate).

## STUDY 2: RESULTS

We followed the same procedure in Study 1 to test all the hypotheses, except that we included supervisor relational disidentification as an alternative mediator instead of ego-

depletion, and controlled for the baseline levels of the endogenous variables. Supporting Hypothesis 1, we found that abusive manager behavior was positively related to supervisor contempt ( $b = 1.14, p < .01$ ). As for Hypothesis 2, we found no evidence to support the indirect effect of abusive manager behavior on interpersonal justice toward subordinate via contempt, because contempt was again not related to interpersonal justice toward subordinate and the 95%CIs of the indirect effect included zero (indirect effect =  $-0.20$ , 95%CI:  $[-0.57, 0.17]$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Interestingly, neither did we find support for the cognitive mechanism which was found in previous research. However, we found that moral attentiveness moderated the relationship between supervisor contempt and interpersonal justice toward subordinate ( $b = .49, p < .05$ ). We further found support for the conditional indirect effect, such that the positive indirect relationship between abusive manager behavior and interpersonal justice toward subordinate via supervisor contempt was only found among supervisors who were more morally attentive (indirect effect =  $0.75$ , 95%CI:  $[0.11, 1.48]$ ), but not among those who were less morally attentive (indirect effect =  $-0.54$ , 95%CI:  $[-1.57, 0.37]$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

## DISCUSSION

We developed and tested a theoretical model to examine why and when experienced abusive supervision would motivate enacted interpersonal justice toward subordinate in two field studies. First, we predicted and found that the experiences of managers' abusive supervision were positively related to supervisors' contempt of the managers. Second, based on the social distancing function of contempt, we argued that the feeling of contempt might motivate supervisors to morally differentiate themselves from their abusive managers and to treat their own subordinates in a manner that is opposite to abusive supervision. Although our studies failed to support this indirect effect across all supervisors, we found that only supervisors who were more morally attentive reacted to the feeling of contempt by exhibiting a moral differentiation effect and treating their subordinates in a more respectful and polite way. Third, we also showed that our emotion-based model is more plausible than a resource-based model (i.e., ego depletion as a mechanism) or a cognition-based model (i.e., relational disidentification as a mechanism).

Our study makes three significant contributions to research on abusive supervision and contempt. First, unlike the mainstream research on abusive supervision, where abused supervisors are viewed as passive recipients and learners, our study consider abused supervisors as active agents. Overall, we go beyond prior studies showing a cognitive mechanism of why experienced abusive supervision does not lead to enacted abusive supervision by demonstrating an emotional mechanism of why and when experienced abusive supervision motivates civil leadership behavior. Second, we also consider the boundary condition of the above-mentioned process of experienced abusive supervision begetting interpersonal justice. Our finding that supervisors' moral attentiveness enhances the indirect effect of abusive manager behavior on interpersonal justice toward subordinates via contempt further sheds light on the agentic role of abused victims in breaking the abusive cycle. Third, our study also contributes to the literature on contempt and opens up new research avenues to examine the potential positive consequences of contempt.

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM AUTHORS