

What Have I Done to Deserve This? Effects of Employee Personality and Emotion on Abusive Supervision

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Abstract Drawing on victim precipitation theory, we propose that certain employees are more likely to perceive abusive supervision because of their personality traits. Specifically, we hypothesize that subordinates' emotional stability, conscientiousness, and agreeableness will be negatively related to perceived abuse from their supervisor and that negative emotions at work will mediate these relationships. We surveyed 222 employees and found that emotional stability and conscientiousness negatively predicted employees' self-reports of abusive supervision and that this relationship was mediated by negative emotions. Thus, employees lower in emotional stability or conscientiousness are more likely to experience negative emotions, which in turn is related to higher levels of abuse.

Keywords Abusive supervision · Negative emotion · Personality · Victim precipitation theory

Abusive supervision refers to subordinates' perceptions that their supervisor directs repeated acts of hostility toward them (Tepper 2000). These hostile acts exclude physical aggression, but can include ridiculing, giving the silent treatment, invading one's privacy, blaming, taking undue credit, behaving rudely, lying, and breaking promises. This is a perceptual construct because it focuses on the subjective evaluation subordinates make about their supervisor's behavior based on their observations of

him or her (Tepper 2007). Thus, subordinates might have different assessments of the same behavior; one subordinate may consider a supervisor's behavior acceptable while another views it as hostile. As a result, research on abusive supervision measures abuse from subordinates' point of view versus the supervisor's because it is the subordinates' perceptions of supervisory behavior that drive responses to it (Mitchell and Ambrose 2007). Thus, when we use the term abusive supervision in this study, we are referring to employees' self-reports of abuse or perceived abuse.

With at least 1.4 million employees subjected to regular abuse from their supervisors in concert with the negative consequences of this abuse (e.g., absenteeism, turnover, reduced productivity, and increased health care costs) costing businesses approximately \$24 billion annually (Tepper et al. 2006), it is imperative that managers and researchers identify the predictors of abusive supervision and organizational interventions to curtail it. Unfortunately, only a handful of studies have examined the antecedents of abusive supervision and this work focuses primarily on the personal characteristics of the supervisors engaging in the abuse (e.g., depression and hostile attribution bias) and situational factors they face such as organizational injustice or psychological contract violations (Aryee et al. 2007; Hoobler and Brass 2006; Rafferty et al. 2010; Tepper et al. 2006, 2011). Although this is a good start, it neglects an important part of the story: the targets of abusive supervision. We extend this growing body of work by shifting from the supervisor's perspective to the target's in order to determine why some employees are more likely to perceive abusive supervision than others. We do this by focusing on how targets might foster their own mistreatment, which will offer insight into ways they can deter the continuation or escalation of abuse. Thus, we

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contribute by examining antecedents that are important to advancing our understanding of abusive supervision.

Researchers have long asserted that victim characteristics are a crucial part of explaining why abuse occurs at work (Aquino and Thau 2009), but few empirical studies have explored this notion (Bowling et al. 2010). Drawing on victim precipitation theory (e.g., Curtis 1974; Elias 1986), we propose that some employees are more susceptible to abusive supervision than others because of the personality characteristics they exhibit. Based on the aforementioned theory as well as past research in the workplace bullying literature, we believe that three personality traits will be negatively related to abusive acts by supervisors: emotional stability, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. The manifestations of these personality traits are often irritating, create tension and conflict, or violate social norms regarding appropriate emotions, cognitions, and behaviors and thus, are more likely to result in abusive supervision.

Although studies on workplace bullying have examined the relationship between employee personality and bullying, we contend that there are meaningful distinctions between workplace bullying and abusive supervision that warrant investigating these constructs separately. First, abusive supervision is restricted to the hierarchical relationship between a supervisor and subordinate while bullying can emanate from coworkers, subordinates as well as supervisors. In addition, bullying allows for multiple perpetrators and targets, which can change the dynamics of the mistreatment by moving from a dyadic relationship to a group phenomenon. Second, although both include hostile acts, abusive supervision only encompasses nonphysical acts of hostility while bullying recognizes both psychological and physical mistreatment. Finally, abusive supervision does not qualify the intended outcome of the hostile act, which means that these acts could have prosocial intentions like motivating and enhancing performance (Tepper 2007). Conversely, bullies have malevolent intentions as they seek out those who are not able to defend themselves (Hoel and Cooper 2001). In summary, past research on bullying primarily focuses on mistreatment between or among coworkers while neglecting the mistreatment that occurs solely in the supervisor–subordinate relationship. We remedy this by examining a unique form of interpersonal mistreatment, abusive supervision.

Even though workplace bullying studies have explored the link between employee personality and interpersonal mistreatment, they do not offer an explanation for this relationship. Conversely, we move beyond this direct relationship by offering negative emotions as a mechanism through which personality is related to abusive supervision. Employees with provocative personality traits (traits that are considered by others to be hostile, annoying, or

inappropriate) tend to display more negative emotions at work, which subsequently leads to greater self-reports of abusive supervision. Thus, we offer a reason for why personality is associated with abusive supervision by contending that subordinates' negative emotions will mediate the negative relationships between emotional stability, conscientiousness, and agreeableness and abusive supervision. Furthermore, although there are a few studies investigating personality and abusive supervision, they focus on personality as a moderator of the relationship between abuse and negative outcomes (e.g., Bamberger and Bacharach 2006; Tepper et al. 2001). Thus, we further contribute to the literature by taking a step back to determine how personality is related to abusive supervision in the first place. That is, we look at personality as an antecedent of abusive supervision versus how it exacerbates or attenuates subordinates' responses to abuse.

An understanding of the role that personality plays in the likelihood of employees being abused by their supervisors is important for a couple of reasons. First, research investigating the types of employees most likely to become targets of abuse can help organizations identify at-risk individuals and empower them with the tools and resources they need to prevent or deflect abuse. Second, this line of inquiry is important because the consequences of repeated exposure to abusive supervision can be costly not only for organizations as previously mentioned, but they can also take a toll on targets' well-being. Past research suggests that targets of abusive supervision suffer from lower job and life satisfaction, and greater depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Tepper 2000). By gaining an understanding of the causes of abusive supervision, we can enhance employees' quality of life. Third, empirical research has demonstrated that employees who experience abusive supervision are more likely to retaliate against not only the organization, but also other individuals at work for the abuse they experience (Biron 2010; Tepper et al. 2009, 2008; Thau et al. 2009; Thau and Mitchell 2010). Thus, abusive supervision can perpetuate other types of deviant acts, which may be costly for organizations and may even be directed at innocent bystanders.

Our study makes several contributions to the abusive supervision literature. First, we seek to examine abusive supervision from the target's perspective. Most research investigates the attributes of the supervisor and the work environment as antecedents, but overlooks subordinate characteristics that might also contribute to abuse (Aquino and Byron 2002). By exploring this viewpoint, we hope it will encourage other researchers to take the understudied perspective of the subordinate when investigating abusive supervision. Second, our investigation is theoretically driven by victim precipitation theory and focuses on the subordinate–supervisor context. This approach makes our

study distinct because few studies in other areas of workplace mistreatment (e.g., workplace bullying) have been anchored in theory and most do not isolate mistreatment by its source. Third, we offer an explanation for the direct effects of employee personality on abusive supervision. Most of the research on targets of abuse seeks to identify factors that put them at risk without offering a reason for why these traits induce abuse. We believe that negative emotion is one such mechanism that can offer insight into why subordinates' personality predisposes them toward abusive supervision.

Victim Precipitation Theory

The criminology literature has long recognized that certain types of people are more likely to be victims of crime and refers to this concept as victim precipitation (e.g., Curtis 1974; Elias 1986; Gottfredson 1981; Schultz 1968; Wolfgang 1958). Derived from much empirical work, the basic premise of victim precipitation is that victimization is not a random process. That is, not everyone is an equally likely target, but rather some victims either wittingly or unwittingly contribute, to some degree, to their own victimization by displaying certain emotional or behavioral tendencies (e.g., anger, violations of social norms, accommodating or yielding behavior) that elicit aggression from others.

Based on this literature, a fairly consistent picture of typical victims has emerged. In his research on bullying among school-aged children, Olweus (1978) identified two types of victims. The first, passive or submissive, refers to those who become victims because they present themselves as an easy or vulnerable target. Submissive victims are perceived by bullies as unable to defend themselves or to retaliate because they have weaknesses in their personality such as low self-esteem or they are passive, nonaggressive, nervous, insecure, socially withdrawn, unassertive, and anxious. These characteristics signal to aggressors that the individuals are safe targets. Conversely, provocative victims are often targets of aggression because they provoke it by exhibiting personality driven attitudes, emotions, or behaviors that induce tension and conflict, and are considered to be hostile, annoying, threatening, demanding, aggressive, or inappropriate. Researchers have also applied these victim categories to incidents of workplace mistreatment (e.g., Aquino 2000; Einarsen 1999; Kim and Glomb 2010).

In summary, victim precipitation theory and subsequent empirical work support the premise that personality traits predispose individuals to exhibit cognitive, emotional, or behavioral responses that may encourage victimization because these responses either suggest vulnerability or are

provocative (Bowling et al. 2010). We extend this work by examining the relationship between the personality traits of provocative victims and their self-reports of being subjected to abusive acts by their supervisors. It is important to study provocative victims because unlike passive victims, they are more likely to display frustrating or irritating emotions or behaviors that may encourage abusive supervision and they also may be inclined to react and perhaps escalate an abusive interaction by aggressively responding to it (Aquino and Lamertz 2004; Monks et al. 2009). Below we discuss in detail the traits we believe exemplify provocative victims of abusive supervision.

Subordinate Personality and Abusive Supervision

Personality refers to individuals' relatively stable and enduring predispositions to think, believe, feel, and behave in certain ways (Ones et al. 2005). Personality consists of an overall profile or combination of characteristics that can be used to differentiate between individuals. These traits result in predictable patterns of thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors over time and across contexts. Thus, personality may offer useful insights into why some employees are more likely to experience abusive supervision than others. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, the studies looking at both abusive supervision and personality treat personality as a moderator of the link between abuse and various outcome variables. Further, we could only find one study on abusive supervision that has examined victim personality as an antecedent of abuse (Wu and Hu 2009), but this study did not explore any intervening variables of this direct relationship as we do in the current study. Thus, unlike past research, we investigate if personality predicts abusive supervision as well as the underlying reason for this relationship.

We expand victim precipitation theory by drawing on the Big Five taxonomy to identify personality traits indicative of provocative victims. This classification system offers a coherent way to organize the vast amount of personality traits that have been identified (Digman 1990; Goldberg 1990) and argues that essentially all traits can be classified into one of five broad factors: agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, extroversion, and openness to experience. We focus on emotional stability, conscientiousness, and agreeableness because employees lower on these traits often display aggressive, frustrating, and unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, which may provoke abusive supervision.

Emotional stability assesses the presence and outcomes of negative emotions. Individuals at the higher end of this factor tend to withstand stress, have a positive outlook on

life, and are described as calm, stable, poised, composed, unworried, secure, relaxed, and self-confident (Costa and McCrae 1985). Conversely, those at the lower end (often referred to as neuroticism) are likely to experience negative emotions and distress regularly, have a pessimistic view of themselves and the world around them, and are often perceived as sad, scared, nervous, anxious, depressed, high-strung, angry, and hostile.

According to victim precipitation theory, individuals lower in emotional stability fit the description of a provocative victim (e.g., Aquino and Thau 2009; Bowling and Beehr 2006). These individuals focus on the negative aspects of their job and workplace as well as regularly experience emotional distress, which can lead to deficient performance on both job-related tasks and in interpersonal relationships. Individuals lower in emotional stability are also less likeable as employees and often have worse relationships with their supervisor (George 1992). In summary, inept performance coupled with their tendency to behave in socially inappropriate ways in interpersonal settings and to react to situations (even objectively non-hostile ones) in a hostile, demanding, and confrontational manner (Watson and Clark 1984) may make employees lower in emotional stability provocative victims (Aquino et al. 1999). Indeed, Milam et al. (2009) found that employees who are lower in emotional stability were more likely to be perceived as provoking the incivility they received from their coworkers. Drawing on victim precipitation theory and past research, we believe employees lower in emotional stability are likely to be demanding and difficult to work with, which in turn, may be related to greater levels of abusive supervision. Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1 Emotional stability will be negatively related to employees' self-reports of abusive supervision.

Conscientiousness boils down to an assessment of one's reliability. Individuals higher on this trait tend to demonstrate greater self-discipline and aim for high levels of achievement and competence. They are labeled as hard-working, purposeful, responsible, persistent, well organized, competent, orderly, and dutiful (Costa and McCrae 1985). Managers appreciate and have good relationships with subordinates who are conscientious because these employees tend to be more competent (Bowling and Beehr 2006). Indeed, research demonstrates that conscientiousness is a strong predictor of effective job performance (Barrick and Mount 1991).

Conversely, unconscientious individuals are seen as unambitious, disorganized, impulsive, careless, easily distracted, and undependable. According to victim precipitation theory, employees lower in conscientiousness will be more likely to be a target of abusive supervision because

they exhibit the characteristics of provocative victims. That is, their impulsiveness and unreliability can lead to violations of social norms as well as hostility. They will be a burden on their supervisor by exhibiting distracting or disengaging work attitudes, emotions, or behaviors and thus will be more likely to perceive that they are the targets of abusive supervision. In summary, subordinates who are lower in conscientiousness will create more work for their supervisor due to their carelessness, disorganization, and ineptitude, which should in turn make them provocative victims and lead to greater self-reports of abusive supervision. Thus, based on victim precipitation theory and past studies demonstrating a negative relationship between conscientiousness and bullying (Glasø et al. 2007), we offer the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 Conscientiousness will be negatively related to employees' self-reports of abusive supervision.

Agreeableness evaluates individuals' tendency to be compassionate or humane toward others. Individuals higher on this factor are often perceived as friendly, likeable, generous, altruistic, caring, emotionally supportive, good-natured, cooperative, and helpful (Costa and McCrae 1985). Agreeable employees should be less likely to experience abusive supervision because they are considerate and enjoyable to be around and they are competent, especially with regards to interpersonal relationships and tasks (Bowling and Beehr 2006). On the other hand, those lower in agreeableness are often selfish, aggressive, arrogant, hostile, self-centered, spiteful, irritable, uncooperative, inflexible, uncaring, and intolerant (Costa and McCrae 1985). Thus, disagreeable employees characterize provocative victims through their tendency to be rude, mistrustful, antagonistic, skeptical, and egocentric, which can translate into attitudes, feelings, or behaviors deemed unacceptable and annoying in the workplace (McCrae and Costa 1987). Disagreeable individuals are frustrating and thus, may be associated with greater incidents of abusive supervision.

Victim precipitation theory and past research supports the notion that disagreeable individuals are likely to be provocative victims. Milam et al. (2009) found that disagreeable employees were more likely to be viewed as provocative, which in turn, translated into greater incidents of incivility by their coworkers. Likewise, Graziano et al. (1996) found that individuals low in agreeableness displayed more provocative behaviors. Thus, disagreeable subordinates, due to their contentious nature, should be more likely to self-report abusive acts by their supervisor.

Hypothesis 3 Agreeableness will be negatively related to employees' self-reports of abusive supervision.

Negative Emotions at Work as a Mediator

Victim precipitation theory argues that certain individuals are more likely to be victims of interpersonal mistreatment than others because of their predisposition to display emotions, cognitions, or behaviors that signal to others that they are easy or deserving targets. To test this theory, we propose that the mechanism through which provocative victims become targets of abuse is their tendency to experience and display negative emotions. By nature, provocative victims experience more negative emotions, which may be perceived as annoying, demanding, or counter to social norms, thus eliciting mistreatment from others. Thus, we extend victim precipitation theory and the abusive supervision literature by offering negative emotion as an explanation for why employee personality characteristics are related to abusive supervision.

Emotion refers to intense, short-lived feelings or affect states (e.g., anger, sadness, envy, joy, happiness, and pride) that are linked to a specific cause and tend to disrupt normal functioning (Frijda 1993). This is in contrast to moods, which are relatively mild, longer lasting feelings that are not associated with a particular cause and do not interrupt daily routines (Clark and Isen 1982). We focus on emotions rather than moods because supervisors are more likely to notice them due to their high level of intensity and disruptive nature. Further, they are context-specific, thus, emotions emanating from the workplace are more useful in predicting job-related variables, like abusive supervision, than context-free moods (Van Katwyk et al. 2000). More specifically, we argue that employees with provocative personality traits tend to display more negative emotions at work, which are subsequently related to greater levels of abusive supervision.

According to differential emotions theory, there is a strong relationship between personality and emotions (Izard 1977). Personality traits predispose individuals to experience certain emotions, some of which are perceived as irritating to others because they violate social norms (Milam et al. 2009). Employees are expected to display positive emotions at work in order to facilitate teamwork, cooperation, communication, and effective interpersonal interactions (Staw et al. 1994; Sutton and Rafaeli 1988). However, some employees have an innate tendency to violate these norms by routinely exhibiting negative emotions at work, which makes them a provocative target.

Research shows that provocative victims are more likely to violate social norms by displaying negative emotions. For example, individuals lower in emotional stability have a propensity to experience and express a wide range of negative emotions including hostility, anxiety, depression (Brief and Weiss 2002; Watson and Clark 1984), fear, anger, sadness, and shame (Trierweiler et al. 2002).

Similarly, disagreeable and unconscientious individuals are likely to display negative emotions at work because these traits are associated with a lack of self-control (Jensen-Campbell et al. 2007). Individuals lower in agreeableness have a more difficult time inhibiting their disagreeable inclinations, and thus they are unable to adhere to social rules dictating the display of positive emotions (Mount et al. 2006) and to control their expression of negative emotions (Costa et al. 1989; Tobin et al. 2000). Likewise, individuals lower in conscientiousness lack the self-regulation needed to attend to and control negative emotional states at work (Jensen-Campbell et al. 2007) because of their tendency to be impulsive, careless, and undependable.

In summary, employees lower in emotional stability, agreeableness, or conscientiousness lack the ability to control their expression of negative emotions at work and to adhere to social norms requiring the display of positive ones. This may attract unwanted attention from their supervisor and over time they may become the recipients of abusive supervision. Support for this notion can be found in a meta-analysis by Bowling and Beehr (2006) who demonstrated that negative emotions at work were positively related to workplace harassment. Collectively, victim precipitation theory and evidence from past research suggest that emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness will be inversely associated with negative emotions at work and that negative emotions will be, in turn, positively associated with abusive supervision. Therefore, we offer the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 4a Negative emotions will mediate the negative relationship between emotional stability and employees' self-reports of abusive supervision.

Hypothesis 4b Negative emotions will mediate the negative relationship between conscientiousness and employees' self-reports of abusive supervision.

Hypothesis 4c Negative emotions will mediate the negative relationship between agreeableness and employees' self-reports of abusive supervision.

Method

Procedure and Sample

Survey respondents were solicited from undergraduate business courses at a large university located in the Southeastern United States. Participants were guaranteed anonymity as no identifying information was collected and they were given class time to complete a survey asking about their demographics, personality, emotional states at work, and exposure to abusive supervision. To be eligible

to participate, respondents had to be employed at least part-time and have a supervisor. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were offered in exchange for filling out the survey.

The initial sample consisted of 247 participants; however, 25 surveys were eliminated due to missing data. The final sample ($N = 222$) consisted mostly of part-time employees (74 %), males (55 %), and had an average age of about 23 years. The majority of the sample was white (74 %), followed by African American (12 %), Asian American (5 %), Latino (5 %), and other (4 %). Respondents worked in a variety of jobs including restaurant (18 %), supervisory (14 %), education (10 %), administrative (8 %), sales (7 %), retail (6 %), and financial (5 %). The average participant worked for their employer for ~2.60 years.

Measures

Personality

Employee personality was assessed using three scales from the International Personality Item Pool (Goldberg et al. 2006). Agreeableness (e.g., “I sympathize with others’ feelings”), conscientiousness (e.g., “I am always prepared”), and emotional stability (e.g., “I am relaxed most of the time”) were each measured with 10 items. Participants reported how accurate they believed each statement described them using a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (very inaccurate) to 5 (very accurate).

Negative Emotions

On-the-job emotions were measured using the Job-Related Affective Well-Being scale developed by Van Katwyk et al. (2000). This measure evaluates a wide range of positive and negative emotional states experienced at work. We only used the 15 items related to negative emotions (e.g., “My job made me feel angry”), which assess feelings like anger, anxiety, boredom, and depression. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt negative emotions at work during the last 30 days using a 5-point scale ranging from (1) never to (5) extremely often or always.

Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision was measured with the 15-item scale developed by Tepper (2000). This measure assesses the frequency that subordinates perceive they experience nonphysical acts by their supervisor such as “My boss ridicules me” or “My boss tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid.” Participants responded using a 5-point scale

ranging from (1) “I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me” to (5) “He/she uses this behavior very often with me”.

Control Variables

We controlled for participants’ gender (1 = male and 2 = female), age, and organizational tenure because these variables may confound the relationship between subordinate personality and abusive supervision. For example, a meta-analysis by Bowling and Beehr (2006) found that victims of workplace harassment were more likely to be male, younger, or have longer tenure. Similarly, research on abusive supervision has demonstrated that supervisors tend to abuse younger or male employees more frequently than older or female workers (e.g., Bamberger and Bacharach 2006).

Results

To test our hypotheses, we used a macro developed by Hayes and Preacher (2011) to calculate omnibus tests for the total, direct, and indirect effects of subordinate personality on abusive supervision via negative emotions while controlling for gender, age, and tenure. Although the causal steps approach outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) has traditionally been used to establish mediation effects, this method has its shortcomings such as low power for detecting mediation and a lack of emphasis on quantifying the indirect effect (MacKinnon et al. 2002; Preacher and Hayes 2008; Shrout and Bolger 2002). The MEDIANTE macro overcomes these limitations by directly testing the indirect effect versus inferring its existence through the rejection of a series of null hypotheses tests (Hayes and Preacher 2011). Not only does this macro provide a more powerful test of mediation, it also accommodates multiple independent variables. Finally, it generates percentile bootstrap confidence intervals to evaluate the significance of the indirect effects. This method is preferred to Sobel or normal theory tests because it does not assume that the sample is normally distributed and it is good to use when the sample size is not large (e.g., Preacher and Hayes 2004; Preacher et al. 2007; Shrout and Bolger 2002).

Means, standards deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients for the study variables are shown in Table 1. We predicted that emotional stability (Hypothesis 1), conscientiousness (Hypothesis 2), and agreeableness (Hypothesis 3) would be negatively related to employees’ self-reports of abusive supervision. To evaluate these hypotheses, we examined the total effects model generated by the MEDIANTE macro, which calculates the effects of the controls and independent variables on the dependent

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for the study variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender ^a	1.45	.50	–							
2. Age	22.93	4.74	.00	–						
3. Tenure	2.60	2.13	–.01	.15*	–					
4. Emotional stability	3.21	.64	–.21**	.10	–.04	.81				
5. Conscientiousness	3.60	.61	.17**	.05	.08	.04	.80			
6. Agreeableness	3.77	.53	.08	–.03	–.03	.13*	.24***	.76		
7. Negative emotions	2.25	.73	–.04	–.01	.11	–.31***	–.15*	–.05	.90	
8. Abusive supervision	1.60	.68	–.08	–.07	.10	–.21**	–.18**	–.07	.48***	.91

N = 222. Scale reliabilities are listed on the diagonal

^a 1 = male and 2 = female

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

variable. Although the overall model was statistically significant [$R^2 = .10$, $F(6, 208) = 4.00$, $p < .001$], none of the control variables significantly predicted abusive supervision (see Table 2). However, emotional stability and conscientiousness were significantly and inversely related to abusive supervision while agreeableness was unrelated. Further, we evaluated the omnibus test of the total effect, which indicates whether the independent variables predict the dependent variable over and above the effects of the control variables. This test found that the personality variables improve the prediction of abusive supervision beyond that contributed by the control variables [$R^2 = .08$, $F(3, 208) = 6.22$, $p < .001$]. In summary, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported while Hypothesis 3 was not. Thus, employees lower in emotional stability or conscientiousness are more likely to self-report abuse from their supervisor.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that negative emotions would mediate the relationship between emotional stability (4a), conscientiousness (4b), and agreeableness (4c) and employees' self-reports of abusive supervision. Table 2 shows that emotional stability and conscientiousness were negatively related to negative emotions, but that agreeableness was not. This suggests that employees lower in emotional stability or conscientiousness were more likely to experience negative emotions at work. Further, we examined the direct effects model, which looks at the effects of the controls, independent variables, and mediator on the dependent variable. This model was statistically significant [$R^2 = .26$, $F(7, 207) = 10.32$, $p < .001$] and found that negative emotions was the only significant predictor of abusive supervision when all the variables were included in the model. We also conducted an omnibus test of the direct effects model, which evaluates the null hypothesis that the independent variables have no direct effect on the dependent variable. The omnibus test was not statistically significant [$R^2 = .02$, $F(3, 207) = 1.51$, $p = .2121$], thus we were unable to reject the null

Table 2 Mediation results

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Total effects model (DV = Abusive supervision)				
Constant	3.33	.48	6.95	.000
Gender ^a	–.14	.09	–1.50	.135
Age	–.01	.01	–.87	.383
Tenure	.00	.00	–1.43	.155
Emotional stability	–.24	.07	–3.31	.001
Conscientiousness	–.19	.08	–2.48	.014
Agreeableness	.02	.09	.19	.848
Indirect effects model (DV = Negative emotions)				
Constant	3.96	.49	8.10	.000
Gender	–.15	.10	–1.60	.112
Age	.00	.01	.41	.682
Tenure	.00	.00	.79	.429
Emotional stability	–.40	.08	–5.33	.000
Conscientiousness	–.18	.08	–2.27	.024
Agreeableness	.07	.09	.80	.423
Direct effects model (DV = Abusive supervision)				
Constant	1.71	.50	3.42	.001
Gender	–.08	.09	–.91	.363
Age	–.01	.01	–1.15	.253
Tenure	.00	.00	1.20	.230
Emotional stability	–.08	.07	–1.12	.263
Conscientiousness	–.12	.07	–1.66	.098
Agreeableness	–.01	.08	–.16	.876
Negative emotions	.41	.06	6.58	.000

N = 222

DV = dependent variable

^a 1 = male and 2 = female

hypothesis. Taken together, these results suggest that emotional stability and conscientiousness are related to abusive supervision only through negative emotions.

To evaluate the significance of the indirect effect we used bootstrap confidence intervals. Bootstrapping entails

sampling with replacement from the original dataset to estimate the strength of the indirect effect. The procedure generates confidence intervals for the indirect effect and the indirect effect is significant when the confidence interval does not contain zero. As shown in Table 3, the confidence intervals do not include zero for the mediated effects of negative emotions on the relationships between emotional stability and conscientiousness on abusive supervision. Given that zero is outside of the confidence intervals for these personality traits, we can conclude that there is an indirect effect of personality on abusive supervision through negative emotions. Therefore, Hypotheses 4a and 4b were supported, but Hypothesis 4c was not. In summary, employees lower in emotional stability or conscientiousness are more likely to self-report experiencing abusive supervision because of their negative emotions at work.

Discussion

There is a paucity of research examining the characteristics of employees who are likely to be abused at work. The small body of work exploring this issue neglects to explain why employee traits result in subsequent abuse. In the current study we used victim precipitation as a theoretical framework for determining what types of employees are more likely to self-report experiencing abusive supervision. Further, we proposed that negative emotions at work are the mechanism through which this relationship occurs. Specifically, we predicted that employees lower in emotional stability, conscientiousness, or agreeableness are more likely to display negative emotions, which in turn, increases the likelihood of abusive acts from their supervisor.

The results of this study offer support for our hypotheses and extend our understanding of abusive supervision. First, we found that emotional stability and conscientiousness were negatively related to abusive supervision. That is, employees who are lower in emotional stability or conscientiousness tend to self-report more abuse from their bosses. Next, our tests for mediation show that the effects

of emotional stability and conscientiousness on abusive supervision disappeared when negative emotions were taken into consideration. This shows that subordinates lower in these traits experience abusive supervision because of their tendencies to display negative emotions at work.

Contrary to our expectation, agreeableness was not significantly associated with either negative emotions or abusive supervision. Although we proposed that disagreeable employees would be provocative victims, it might also be the case that agreeable individuals would be perceived as submissive victims. Employees who are highly agreeable are forgiving, trusting, understanding, and cooperative (Costa and McCrae 1985). These individuals may be vulnerable targets for abusive supervisors because they are seen as too accommodating or nice, and thus unlikely to defend themselves or to retaliate against abuse. This suggests that there might be a curvilinear relationship between agreeableness and abusive supervision. That is, employees exhibiting lower or higher levels of agreeableness may be more likely to be abused by their supervisors, albeit for different reasons.

We used hierarchical regression to explore this notion. In step 1 we entered the control variables and in step 2 we added agreeableness followed by its quadratic term in step 3. As previously noted, the first-order effect was not significant, but the squared term was ($\beta = .14, p < .05$). This finding and the subsequent plotting of the data support the presence of a U-shaped curvilinear relationship. Employees are more likely to experience abusive supervision at lower and higher levels of agreeableness, but not at moderate levels. However, negative emotions did not mediate the curvilinear relationship between agreeableness and abusive supervision. This finding may suggest the importance of reciprocity and balance in workplace relationships. Those employees who maintain a balanced level of agreeableness may be less likely to be targets of abusive supervision. For example, Lamertz and Aquino (2004) found that employees who maintained a balance in their dyadic friendship networks reported lower levels of victimization than employees whose friendship networks did not. This is an important finding adding nuance to our understanding of victim precipitation theory.

The current study contributes to the abusive supervision literature by adding to the limited number of studies investigating the antecedents of abusive supervision. Past work on the precursors of abusive supervision has focused primarily on the characteristics of the supervisor engaging in abuse and their perceived work context. We took the next logical step by exploring subordinate personality traits that may also explain why some employees are abused at work while others are not. Thus, we extend the literature by taking the perspective of the subordinate versus the

Table 3 Results for tests of the indirect effects of negative emotions

Indirect effect	Point estimate	Bootstrapping (95 % CIs)	
		Lower	Higher
Emotional stability	−.1638	−.2607	−.0864
Conscientiousness	−.0725	−.1510	−.0062
Agreeableness	.0296	−.0470	.1194
Total	.0538	.0212	.1113

N = 222. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000

supervisor. We also augment the literature by using victim precipitation theory to select personality traits relevant to abusive supervision. We identified traits that exemplify provocative victims as described by this theory and subsequent research. Further, we draw on victim precipitation theory to provide a rationale for the relationship between subordinate traits and abuse. We show that negative emotions are the reason why certain types of employees are more likely to experience abusive supervision than others. Based on these findings, future research should examine the characteristics of the supervisor, subordinate, and work context in concert to gain a more complete understanding of abusive supervision.

Study Implications

Our results show that employees low in conscientiousness or emotional stability are more likely to self-report being abused by their managers. This suggests that managers need to understand their subordinates' personality traits, how these traits may trigger an abusive reaction from them, and ways to manage employees to prevent these pressure points from surfacing. Individuals low in conscientiousness tend to be disorganized, unreliable, and easily distracted. As a result, managers need to provide clear directions and guidance, set priorities, rigid deadlines, and close supervision to these subordinates to prevent their behaviors from activating abuse. Likewise, subordinates low in emotional stability tend to experience emotional distress easily and react in a hostile and confrontational manner even in situations not meant to be antagonistic. Thus, managers may need to minimize stress and conflict for these subordinates as well as give them feedback in a sensitive manner so that it will not offend or put them on the defensive since these subordinate reactions could instigate abusive supervision.

Although we firmly believe that ultimate responsibility and culpability resides with the supervisor who engages in abusive supervision, it is essential to discover subordinate characteristics that are indicative of these behaviors so that organizations can identify at-risk individuals early and intervene before they suffer any negative consequences. By increasing employee awareness of the personality-driven emotions and behaviors that may foster abuse, a conscious effort can be made to avoid these triggers. The findings of our study are important because they suggest ways in which targets can protect themselves from abusive acts. In particular, employees can inhibit abusive supervision by minimizing negative emotions.

Our results suggest the importance of regulating negative emotions in the workplace. Emotion regulation entails methods that individuals use to influence what, when, and how emotions are experienced and expressed (Gross 1998) and they have the goal of experiencing more positive and

less negative emotions (Tice and Bratslavsky 2000). Gross (1998) delineated two broad categories of emotion regulation techniques. The first, response-focused regulation, happens after emotions are experienced. Instead of altering inner feelings, this type of regulation attempts to change the expression of felt emotions through experiential, behavioral, and physiological tactics. One common method of response-focused regulation is suppression or inhibition of emotional expressive behaviors by hiding the felt emotion or containing it. However, research shows that this is not an effective method for regulating emotions. For example, a study by Gross and John (2003) demonstrated that this method decreased positive emotion instead of increasing it and raised the amount of negative emotion experienced versus minimizing it. Further, individuals using this technique experienced less social support, more depressive symptoms, and diminished well-being.

Conversely, the second category of emotion regulation, antecedent-focused regulation, is used to change the path of emotions before they are fully experienced. This can be achieved by selectively choosing which situations to involve oneself in, modifying the situation so that it leads to desired emotions, selectively attending to aspects of the environment that elicit desired emotions, and cognitively reappraising the situation so that it can be viewed in a positive or at least neutral manner (Gross and John 2003). Fortunately, this set of techniques attained better outcomes because they change the course of an emotion early in the emotion generation process (Gross and John 2003; John and Gross 2007). Individuals using antecedent-focused regulation experienced and expressed more positive emotions and less negative ones. In addition, they had closer relationships and were better liked by their peers, were more satisfied with their lives, and had higher levels of well-being (Gross and John 2003). Therefore, organizations should provide potential targets of abusive supervision with training in antecedent-focused regulation in order to decrease their likelihood of experiencing negative emotions at work and thus, reducing their chances of being targets of abuse. In all, we believe that subordinate personality traits associated with abusive supervision are amendable to emotional modification, which can save companies money, time, and other resources leading to a more satisfied and productive workforce.

Study Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, the current one has limitations that we must acknowledge. Leymann (1996) strongly asserted that victim personality does not play a role in the occurrence of aggression, but rather it is an outcome of prolonged exposure to such acts. Although we cannot completely rule out the possibility of reverse causality due to our cross-

sectional design, we believe it is highly unlikely that abusive supervision causally precedes employee personality. First, victim precipitation theory argues that victims unconsciously or consciously instigate victimization through their personality-driven actions. This theoretical framework supports our proposition that subordinate personality predicts abusive supervision. Second, much research indicates that personality is genetically based (e.g., Jang et al. 1996) and stable over time (Costa and McCrae 1988; Roberts and DelVecchio 2000). This suggests that personality is difficult to change even in the face of trying events like abusive supervision. Third, Bowling et al. (2010) used a two-wave prospective design with a 13-month time lag to address the issue of causality in the relationship between employee personality and workplace victimization. They found that personality traits measured at Time 1 predicted victimization by supervisors and coworkers at Time 2. However, Time 1 victimization was not a significant predictor of personality measured at Time 2 after controlling for Time 1 personality. Thus, theory and past research support that the temporal order is from personality to victimization and not vice versa.

Similarly, an argument could be made that negative emotion is an outcome of abusive supervision as opposed to an antecedent. Differential emotions theory, as well as past research on the Big 5, supports the notion that our personality traits predispose us to experience certain emotions. Victim precipitation theory further argues that certain individuals are more likely to be mistreated due to their personality-driven attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Thus, there is theoretical as well as empirical support for our current model. However, recent studies exploring negative emotion as an outcome of abusive supervision found a positive relationship between the two (Hoobler and Hu 2013; Yagil et al. 2011). Unfortunately, the aforementioned studies as well as ours measured negative emotion and abusive supervision at the same time, so causation cannot be determined. Nevertheless, a plausible explanation for reconciling negative emotion as both an antecedent and outcome could be that it creates a vicious cycle where it generates the initial incidents of abuse and then propagates abuse when subordinates experience negative emotion in response to being abused. Future research should employ longitudinal designs in order to tease apart the sequencing of negative emotion and abusive supervision or to provide support for the cyclical nature of negative emotion and abuse.

Our use of self-report measures might increase the probability that common method variance (CMV) affected our observed results. While possible, we believe the likelihood that CMV spuriously inflated the observed relationships among the study variables is unlikely. As Spector (2006) pointed out, the use of self-report measures does not

automatically mean that CMV is an issue. He cites research showing that self-report methodology does not guarantee significant results will be obtained and that errors often associated with self-reports, like social desirability and response bias, account for a trivial amount of variance, if any. For example, Crampton and Wagner (1994) compared studies using monomethods versus multimethods and found few significant differences in the strength of correlations between the variables in the two sets of studies. In some cases the correlations were weaker in the monomethod studies compared to correlations in the multimethod studies. Even so, we implemented some of the techniques recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to control for CMV, such as ensuring anonymity for participants, telling participants there are no right or wrong responses, and encouraging participants to respond as honestly as possible.

We also used statistical methods to assess whether CMV exists. Podsakoff et al. (2003) recommend using a single-common-method-factor approach to evaluate CMV in research situations like ours (i.e., predictor and criterion measured at the same time from the same source and the source of method bias is unknown). With this method, we controlled for the effects of a single unmeasured latent method factor by allowing scale items to load on their relevant constructs (i.e., emotional stability, conscientiousness, agreeableness, negative emotions, and abusive supervision) in addition to loading on a latent common methods variance factor. We compared the fit of the model with and without the latent common methods variance factor to determine if the former substantially improved the fit over the latter model, which would indicate that CMV is an issue in our study. We found that the fit of the model without the factor [$\chi^2(1,643) = 3,178.23$, $p < .001$, CFI = .71, RMSEA = .07] did not substantially improve with the addition of the latent common methods variance factor [$\chi^2(1,584) = 2,770.80$, $p < .001$, CFI = .77, RMSEA = .06], thus providing evidence that CMV does not explain our findings.

We believe that it is important to measure abusive supervision from the subordinates' perspective versus the supervisor's because it is the subordinates' perceptions that induce reactions to what they believe are acts of hostility. However, we must also recognize that our measure of abusive supervision entails employees' self-reports of their exposure to abuse. Abusive supervision is a perceptual construct that emphasizes subordinates' assessments of their supervisor's behavior and does not represent an objective measure of abuse. Although the way we measured abusive supervision is consistent with its definition and past research, future research should examine whether there is a discrepancy between subordinate and supervisor or coworker perceptions of supervisory behavior as abusive. It could be the

case that certain individuals are more likely to perceive abuse in situations where none actually occurred (Aquino and Lamertz 2004). In summary, although perceptions and reality often overlap, we cannot definitively conclude that more abuse actually happened in our study as a result of employees' personality and negative emotions.

Participants in our study were asked to rate the extent to which they experienced negative emotions at work over the past 30 days, which could have encouraged retrospective bias. Robinson and Clore (2002) point out that we tend to overestimate the intensity of our positive and negative emotions when asked for this information retrospectively and that our ability to recall episodic information decays with the passing of time. To investigate the extent of this bias, the authors conducted three studies asking participants to rate their emotions over seven different time frames and found that participants relied on an episodic retrieval strategy in the short time frames (i.e., at the moment, in the last few hours, in the last few days) and a semantic retrieval strategy for the long time frames (i.e., the last few months, in the last few years, in general). Thus, participants were more likely to have retrospective biases with longer time periods (i.e., the last few months or longer) and as a result they reported more intense emotions. Thus, the authors concluded that "...there is striking convergence for the idea that episodic information becomes inaccessible after several weeks" (p. 211).

Given that our time period was 30 days, we believe that episodic information was still retrievable for our participants. Further, Robinson and Clore (2002) found that the tendency to report more positive than negative emotions increased when participants relied on semantic versus episodic retrieval strategies. Thus, even if our data were subject to retrospective biases, these biases are more likely to affect positive emotions versus the negative emotions we measured. Nevertheless, we cannot completely rule out the possibility of this bias. As a result, we suggest that future research use experience sampling methodology (ESM) to minimize retrospective bias (Reis and Gable 2000). ESM would ask employees to report their negative emotions while at work at predetermined times over an extended period of time. This would allow researchers to gather information about emotions as they are experienced instead of forcing respondents to recall this information.

Given that the sample used in this study consisted primarily of part-time employees who were relatively young, our results may not generalize to more diverse employee samples. However, we believe that this sample is appropriate for increasing our understanding of abusive supervision. First, Bennett and Robinson (2003) pointed out that research on deviant behaviors in the workplace typically focuses on full-time employees while overlooking the experiences of part-time employees. This may be a costly oversight because

Aquino and colleagues assert that low status employees (e.g., part-time workers) are more likely to be victimized, especially when they exhibit certain personality traits or behaviors (Aquino 2000; Aquino et al. 1999). Second, previous work on abusive supervision has found that younger employees are more likely to experience abuse from their supervisors than older workers (e.g., Bamberger and Bacharach 2006; Harvey et al. 2007). Thus, this study includes a sample that is often on the receiving end of abusive supervision and that has traditionally been neglected.

Although we believe that our study represents a contribution to the growing literature on the antecedents of abusive supervision, more research is needed to help potential targets before they are abused. One way to achieve this is to identify the conditions under which negative emotions are more or less likely to be related to abusive supervision. For example, supervisors may be less likely to react abusively to their subordinates' negative emotions when they are high performers. That is, supervisors may be more tolerant of inappropriate displays of emotion in exchange for elevated levels of productivity. Similarly, managers may hesitate to respond to negative emotions with abuse when there are power asymmetries in the favor of the subordinate (e.g., subordinate has a powerful mentor or network, subordinate has more seniority or knowledge than the supervisor). Thus, future research should investigate potential moderators of the mediated relationship found in this study to determine when the relationship will be stronger or weaker.

We focused on provocative victims because these employees tend to display more annoying and inappropriate emotions and behaviors that may result in abusive supervision. In contrast to passive victims, provocative victims may be more inclined to intensify an abusive encounter by aggressively responding to it. However, future research should also investigate who is likely to be a submissive victim of abusive supervision. Turning to the Big 5 for guidance, we believe that employees lower in extroversion (introverts) may be prototypical of submissive victims. Extroversion refers to the extent that individuals are comfortable with interpersonal relationships. Extroverts tend to seek out and enjoy the company of others while introverts are more quiet, reserved, retiring, timid, cautious, and solitary (Costa and McCrae 1985). Thus, introverts are likely to be perceived by abusive bosses as safe targets because they will be too timid to defend themselves or to retaliate. Likewise, their shy and solitary nature may make them unlikely to report the abuse to others in the organization.

Another direction for future research is to explore the mechanisms that differentiate between submissive and provocative victims. That is, a dyadic study could look at the motivations behind supervisors targeting certain subordinates for abuse. Provocative victims (e.g., those lower

in emotional stability or conscientiousness) should be perceived by their supervisor as unlikeable, frustrating, and annoying while submissive victims (e.g., introverts) should be perceived as vulnerable or weak and, therefore, easier to victimize without the threat of retaliation perhaps associated with provocative victims. Accordingly, other potential mediators of the relationship between personality and abusive supervision could be subordinate likeability or norm violation for provocative victims and subordinate self-esteem or self-confidence for submissive victims. In addition, the personality traits of the abusive boss should be examined in conjunction with the subordinate's personality. Certain types of supervisors may be more or less likely to target provocative or submissive victims. For example, supervisors higher on hostility or aggressiveness may be more likely to respond to provocative victims while those with lower self-esteem may be more likely to target submissive victims in an effort to boost their self-image.

Abusive supervision can substantially impact businesses' bottom-line through lower employee productivity, greater absenteeism, and increased turnover. In addition, abused employees often suffer psychologically in terms of greater stress, depression, and anxiety, which can result in higher health care costs for companies who do not take steps to reduce abusive supervision. One way organizations can combat abusive supervision is by intervening before employees who are at risk for becoming targets experience abuse and its detrimental consequences. By training managers on how to manage different personalities and at risk targets to minimize negative emotions, organizations may be able to prevent abusive supervision.

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