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Perception or Reality? The Perception of Abusive Supervision in the Workplace

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PERCEPTION OR REALITY?

PERCEPTIONS OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION IN THE WORKPLACE

by

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ABSTRACT

Most previous research on workplace mistreatment has proceeded under the assumption that the various forms of mistreatment are uniformly perceived as negative by recipients. Abusive supervision is one form of mistreatment that has rarely ever been examined through a lens of ambiguity. The question many researchers have failed to ask is whether it is reality that every questionable act labeled as abusive is truly abuse, or such perceptions vary across individuals. And for the individuals perceiving the act (the target), what individual differences are influencing their judgement? The purpose of the study was to explore the influence of individual differences on the perception of abusive supervision in the workplace. The study required 134 participants to fill out a series of questionnaires based on their personality traits. They also read a series of 15 vignettes/scenarios based on Tepper's abusive supervision scale to decide whether they found the behavior highlighted to be abusive or not abusive. The results indicated that although no significant correlations were present for overall abuse, the traits of Machiavellianism and Narcissism did show to be predictors of overt abuse, and conscientiousness was a predictor of covert abuse. Variability in perceptions of the individual vignettes were also found among each trait. In addition, the means of overall, overt, and covert abuse all partially supported the notion that abusive acts can be ambiguous.

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INTRODUCTION

Abusive supervision is just one of many forms of what is known as mistreatment in the workplace. Actions labeled as mistreatment can be viewed in a broad spectrum with some forms being considered more deliberate and on the higher end of the spectrum (bullying), to less severe forms on the lower end of the spectrum (incivility). All forms of mistreatment however fall under the larger umbrella of counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). Much literature has been done on overt forms of CWB's and mistreatment such as bullying, but significantly less has been done on more subtle or covert forms.

It is important to note that almost all previous research on workplace mistreatment has proceeded under the assumption that the various forms of mistreatment are uniformly perceived as negative by recipients. Abusive supervision is one form of mistreatment that has rarely ever been examined through a lens of ambiguity. The question many researchers have failed to ask is whether it is reality that every questionable act labeled as abusive is truly abuse, or such perceptions vary across individuals. And for the individuals perceiving the act (the target), what individual differences are influencing their judgement? Although it may not be common for an employee to experience abusive supervision, the effects can prove to be severe and long-lasting. Abusive supervision can result in lower levels of morale, mental health, executive functioning, and an increase in CWBs and quitting (Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017, p. 125).

Defining Abusive Supervision

The term abusive supervision first appeared in the literature in 2000 in work by Tepper. He defined it as the "Subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the

sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (p. 178). Tepper highlights the perception of the target as what classifies an act or series of acts as abusive. Many researchers since Tepper have argued that abusive supervision should be looked at through an objective lens as opposed to a more subjective one. The issue with this concept is that there are limited ways to accurately measure whether or not a behavior is truly abusive.

Some of Tepper's critics, like Chan & McAllister (2014), argued that the solution to the issue is the use of intersubjective agreement. However, little to no evidence in the literature suggests that intersubjectivity between several witnesses provides any legitimate source of accuracy to the act in question. The reason why more objective measures are not effective when deciding whether an act is abusive is because the act in question does not always have to be overt. Aquino et al. (1999) proposed that CWBs, which includes abusive supervision, often occur in a covert manner, where no witnesses are present, or in a way where the person performing the act can pretend as if they were simply misunderstood (as cited in Tepper et al., 2017, p. 126).

Perception vs. Reality

Everyone develops their own perception of an event. For example, imagine a manager walking into a break room and targeting one of his/her subordinates sitting at a table nearby by yelling several mean and hateful comments at them. The person being targeted in the break room may label that as abuse, but their co-worker may not have considered it abusive when the manager yelled the same comments at them earlier that same day. This difference in cognitive labeling highlights the important role perception plays. But how could two individuals perceive the same event differently? The answer may be because they have traits and other inherent differences in their personality that shape their perspectives in a certain way.

Tepper et al. (2017) states that differences in perception of questionable events are more common than not in any workplace setting. Other research has also indicated that it is possible for certain individuals to perceive abuse when none is present, or to claim a behavior was abusive when it was non-abusive (Brees, Martinko, & Harvey, 2016). These instances may be explained by the personality and other individual differences of the individuals, which is why the current study aims to identify what traits or qualities are possibly correlated.

Abrasiveness vs. Abusiveness

To better understand abusiveness, one must be able to distinguish an abrasive act from an abusive act. A blurred line exists between abrasive supervision and abusive supervision. An example of abrasiveness would be a supervisor who comes across as being more bad-tempered and irritable but is mostly performing a type of "tough love" policy between themselves and their subordinates (Tepper et al. 2017, p. 127). An abusive supervisor would be far more harsh, malicious, and spiteful from day to day. Abrasiveness is an important concept because it can be considered the lesser form of abusiveness. Being able to identify and understand this fine line between the two can be essential to how the individual perceives the event. Furthermore, it is possible that an individual may be inclined to label an event as abusive because they simply do not understand what requirements make up abrasiveness.

But what determines whether someone labels an event as being abrasive, abusive, or neither? *Figure 1* illustrates how subordinate characteristics (the second arrow), as well as supervisor behavior and contextual factors, are what shape the individual's perception of an event.
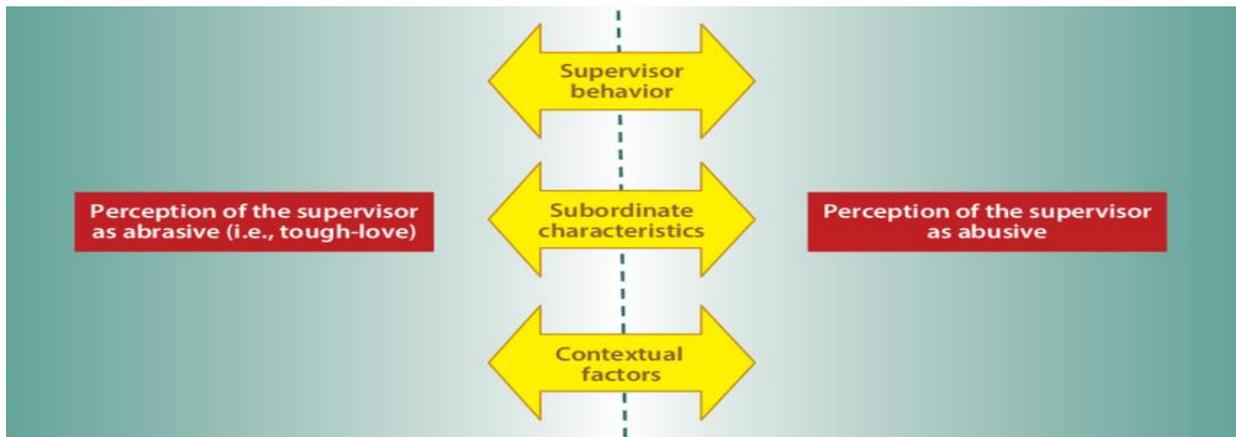
Figure 1. "Fuzzy line" for Abrasive and Abusive Supervision (Tepper et al., 2017, p. 128)

Using subordinate characteristics as part of the model for determining the perception of an event shows how influential individual differences can be. Several previous studies have already been conducted that examined the effect subordinate characteristics have had on abusive supervision. Individuals who possessed hostile attribution style (e.g. Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011), low agreeableness, extroversion (e.g. Brees, Mackey, Martinko, & Harvey, 2014), or entitlement (e.g. Harvey, Harris, Gillis, & Martinko, 2014) all showed significant results for being more likely to perceive their supervisor as abusive (as cited in Tepper et al., 2017, p. 128). However, their research only analyzed the supervisor overall and not the perceived acts themselves. Although they addressed several traits, their research still failed to answer whether some individuals may be more inclined to perceive an act as abusive.

The Five-Factor Model

Individual differences in personality traits make each person unique from another. These differences have largely been studied in an area of personality psychology called the trait tradition. A trait can be defined as a distinguishable and stable pattern of behavior that can influence actions, experiences, and emotions (Shiraev, 2017, p. 212). The five-factor model of

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personality (OCEAN), which originated from McCrae and Costa in 1987, has produced the most productive results in personality research. The study at hand aims to use the success of the five-factor model as a way of better understanding the perceptions of individuals in the workplace.

Several studies (Sliter, Withrow, & Jex, 2015; Milam, Spitzmueller, & Penney, 2009; Rada-Bayne, 2018) have already been conducted that examined the effect personality traits have on the perception of ambiguous acts of mistreatment, specifically incivility. In addition, several studies have already examined the perception of abusive supervision in its unambiguous form (e.g. Martinko et al., 2011; Brees et al., 2014; Harvey et al., 2014). Since the previous studies mentioned had mixed results it is unclear which traits would have the strongest positive or negative correlations towards the perception of an ambiguous event of abuse. The four traits that will be specifically examined are agreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, and neuroticism. Openness is the only trait from the Big Five not examined in the study due to a lack of support in the literature that any positive or negative correlation would exist. It is hypothesized that these four traits from the Big Five will be the strongest predictors for determining whether someone will perceive an act as abuse.

Extraversion. Someone who scores high in extroversion can be characterized as an individual who is outgoing, gregarious, dominant in social settings, and largely talkative compared to others (Shiraev, 2017, p. 214). In comparison, someone who scores low in extroversion is an introvert. Introverts are considered more reflective, quiet, and less involved in social settings. Some previous research (Milam et al., 2009) has theorized that people high in extroversion have such a myriad of social interactions in recent memory that they would be less likely to notice improper behavior from others when it is ambiguous in form. In addition, it is

hypothesized that a highly extroverted individual has enough social capital to the point where they are less likely to take offense from an ambiguous action targeted at them, thus leading them to not perceiving it as abusive.

Another study (Brees et al., 2014), examined the effect personality can have upon the perception of an individual's supervisor. Brees and colleagues found that individuals that scored higher in extroversion were less likely to perceive their supervisor as abusive. Although the questionable acts themselves were not examined, the study still demonstrates that extroversion can influence the target's current perception of the supervisor. Regardless of whether extroverts are less inclined to label an act as abuse because they did not notice it or because they did not see any harm from the act, it is predicted that someone high in extroversion may be less likely to perceive an event or act as abusive.

Hypothesis 1: A negative correlation will be present between extroversion and the perception of an ambiguous act.

Agreeableness. A person who is high in agreeableness can be characterized as cordial, easy-going, friendly, and trusting. Someone low in agreeableness may be viewed as unfriendly, stubborn, and hostile (Shiraev, 2017, p. 215). Results from Milam et al.'s study showed that individuals low in agreeableness claim to experience incivility more frequently than their coworkers (2009). However, Milam and his colleagues were unable to determine whether this increase in "incivility" was due to their perception or because they truly did experience more incivility. To separate this distinction, Sliter et al (2015) focused on only perception, and its relationship with individual personality traits.

The results of both studies indicated that there was a significant negative correlation between agreeableness and the perception of ambiguous acts, which in their case was incivility. Consequently, if an individual high in agreeableness is more likely to label an event as being civil, then they may also be more inclined to label an event as being non-abusive too. An individual high in agreeableness may be more trusting of the supervisor performing the act and give them the benefit of the doubt in a given situation (Sliter et al., 2015). As a result, it is predicted that these same results for incivility perceptions will transfer over to the perception of abusive supervision.

Brees et al.'s study (2014), showed that individuals lower in agreeableness were more likely to perceive their supervisor as abusive in general. Although the findings did not mention the perception of an individual act, it supports the notion that agreeableness does play a role in perceptions of abusive supervision. Due to the previous studies conducted, it is predicted that individuals high in agreeableness will be less likely to perceive an act as abusive.

Hypothesis 2: A negative correlation will be present between agreeableness and the perception of an ambiguous act.

Conscientiousness. Individuals scoring high in conscientiousness can be classified as organized, hardworking, and efficient (Shiraev, 2017, p. 214). In contrast, an individual low in conscientiousness can be characterized as being unreliable and easy-going. The results of several studies (Sliter et al., 2015; Rada-Bayne, 2018) showed that there was a significant positive correlation between conscientiousness and the perception of ambiguous acts of incivility. Although both studies focused on incivility, it is possible that the results will prove to be

transferable to the perception of abusive supervision as well. It is also theorized that individuals high in conscientious might have a higher standard for social etiquette in the workplace (Sliter et al., 2015). Because of their higher standards, it is hypothesized that an individual high in conscientiousness will be more likely to perceive an act as abusive.

Hypothesis 3: A positive correlation will be present between conscientiousness and the perception of an ambiguous act.

Neuroticism. Someone high in neuroticism can be best classified as sensitive, anxious, worrisome, and self-deprecating (Shiraev, 2017, p. 215). Individuals scoring low in neuroticism are calmer and more collected, and less concerned overall of what others think. Brees and colleagues (2014) did find that individuals that scored higher in neuroticism were more likely to perceive their supervisor as abusive. But once again, Brees' findings did not mention the perception of individual acts, and instead only looked at the perception of the supervisor in general. The findings do still support the notion that neuroticism does play a role in perceptions of abusive supervision. Because of this support, it is hypothesized that individuals high in neuroticism will be more likely to perceive an act as abusive.

Hypothesis 4: A positive correlation will be present between neuroticism and the perception of an ambiguous act.

Although the Five Factor Model helps explain a large majority of an individual's personality, it still does not explain all facets that make someone who they are. The Dark Triad, which will be examined in the following section, is one component of an individual's personality that cannot be explained through the Five Factor Model. The Dark Triad is commonly

overlooked by researchers when analyzing perceptions in the workplace, but it could also influence an individual's perception of a questionable event.

The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad can be defined as three overlapping personality traits that are outside of the Big Five and are mostly associated with a negative connotation. Any given individual who possesses one of three traits that make up the Dark Triad can be viewed as having behavioral tendencies that lead them towards pursuing acts of self-promotion, deceitfulness, emotional coldness, and aggressiveness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The three traits that make up the Dark Triad are narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Little previous research has been conducted on the influence traits from the Dark Triad can have upon perception. This gap in the literature is one that will be addressed when determining how personality traits effect the perception of abusive supervision.

Narcissism. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) classifies a narcissistic individual as someone who feels entitled, has a grandiose sense of self, fantasizes about power and success, are unable to tolerate criticism. and has a lack of empathy towards others (Raskin & Terry, 1988). These issues for narcissists may stem from their fragile self-esteem. A fragile self-esteem coupled with an inability to tolerate criticism could result in their feelings getting hurt easier. A study conducted by Harvey et al. (2014), found that an being high in entitlement "primes" the individual or employee to perceive their supervisors as abusive. Because of this distinction, it is predicted that individuals high in narcissism will be more likely to perceive the individual acts themselves as being abusive.

Hypothesis 5: A positive correlation will be present between narcissism and the perception of an ambiguous act.

Machiavellianism. Individuals who display signs of Machiavellianism also exhibit manipulativeness, have little sense of morality or ethical concern for others, and create calculated schemes or behaviors to get what they want (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998). It is predicted that individuals high in Machiavellianism will be less inclined to perceive an act as abusive. This prediction stems from the fact that people high in Machiavellianism may be more likely to relate to the person performing the questionable act because they perform questionable acts themselves. They may also be able to empathize with the superior more because they understand that they may have performed the act to gain control or social capital through manipulation or deception, which is justifiable to them. Individuals high in Machiavellianism would not consider themselves immoral or evil, and thus may consider the questionable act as being harmless and nondetrimental overall. They understand that the roles could have been easily reversed in a different setting or situation with the right socially savvy person, which may make it inoffensive and unabusive in their eyes.

Hypothesis 6: A negative correlation will be present between Machiavellianism and the perception of an ambiguous act.

Psychopathy. Individuals possessing the trait of psychopathy can be classified as callous, antisocial, selfish, unremorseful, and apathetic (McHoskey et al., 1998). Individuals high in psychopathy may be less inclined to perceive an act as abusive because their cold-hearted nature and nihilistic outlook. Someone high in psychopathy can relate to the superior and may reduce

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the severity of the act committed in their mind. This may be because they are disinterested in the thoughts and feelings of someone else that is not themselves.

Hypothesis 7: A negative correlation will be present between psychopathy and the perception of an ambiguous act.

The Present Study

The purpose of the study at hand was to explore the influence individual differences can have upon the perception of abusive supervision in the workplace. The Five Factor Model and the Dark Triad are the subsections of individual differences that were examined in the study. The objective was to look at the issue through a lens of ambiguity. The entirety of previous research in the abusive supervision literature places an assumption on the fact that the actions being perceived by the target were abusive and unambiguous. The study at hand aims to provide evidence in support that actions of perceived abuse can in fact be ambiguous and open to interpretation.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The participants for this study were 134 respondents, and were employees that held a variety of jobs. The demographics of the sample for the study was about 73% Caucasian, 13% Asian, 7% Hispanic, 5% African American, and 2% as other. The sample was also 59% male, 41% female, and had a mean age of 36.2 years (SD = 10.40). Respondents worked an average of 40.2 hours per week (SD = 6.37).

Each participant was given informed consent to participate in the study. For an individual to be able to participate in the study they had to be least 18 years old and be employed at least part-time. Participants for the study were found with the use of Amazon's Mechanical Turk service (MTurk). Participants found through MTurk allow the researcher to find higher quality participants and be more stringent about who can partake in the study. A 96% approval rating was required to participate. Once selected, each participant was instructed to complete questionnaires on the Five Factor Model, the Dark Triad, and abusive supervision. The order of questionnaires was determined randomly in order to control for potential order effects. The primary data analysis included a linear regression in which each of the individual differences measured was used to predict the mean level of abusive ratings.

Measures

Abusive supervision vignettes. The abusive supervision vignettes were based on a revised version of Tepper's (2000) 15-item abusive supervision scale. For the purpose of the study, each item on this scale represented a vignette. Participants rated each item on a 4-point Likert-type scale to

accurately reflect the participant's relationship with their supervisor, with a 4 representing "Extremely abusive" and a 1 representing "Not at all abusive". One example from the vignettes is, "During a meeting your supervisor goes off on a tangent and tells everyone an embarrassing story of you from several years ago in the office. Everyone laughs" (See Appendix A).

Five Factor Model. The personality traits of neuroticism, agreeableness, extroversion, and conscientiousness were measured with the Five Factor Personality Inventory (Goldberg, 1999), which consisted of 40 items due to the omission of openness for the study. Each item on this portion of the survey used ratings from a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being "very inaccurate" and 5 being "very accurate", to determine how well the participant could relate to the question given.

The Dark Triad. The traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy were measured using the Dirty Dozen questionnaire, which consisted of 4 questions pertaining to each trait, and 12 questions in total (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Each item on this portion of the survey used ratings from a 9-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being "disagree strongly" and 9 being "agree strongly", to determine how well the participant could relate to the question given.

RESULTS

A series of analyses were conducted on the sample of 134 respondents. A summary of the descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1. Table 1 includes the mean, standard deviation, observed and possible ranges, and Cronbach's Alpha as a measure of reliability. Cronbach's Alpha was at or above the 0.80 level for each of the independent variables from the Big Five, the three independent variables from the Dark Triad, and the dependent variable of overall perceptions of abuse. Table 2 consists of the intercorrelations among each of the 10 variables. It is also worth noting that the overall perception of abuse had a mean of 2.73 (Table 1). Given that a score of 2 on the abusive supervision scale indicated "slightly not abusive" and a 3 indicated "slightly abusive", which is consistent with the idea that abusive acts can be interpreted with indifference or ambiguity, and are open to interpretation. Table 6 includes the means and standard deviations of each of the vignettes.

All 7 independent variables were placed in a linear regression model and can be seen in Table 3. The steps carried out resulted in no significant correlations between any of the individual differences and overall perceptions of abuse, however conscientiousness (hypothesis 3) did approach significance ($p = .06$). Two separate models were also conducted, with one consisting of the four traits from the Big Five (Table 4), and the other consisting of the Dark Triad (Table 5). This was done because the Dark Triad traits are typically associated with deviance. No significant correlations were found. Because of this, the vignettes were further examined and divided into two separate aggregates of data.

Since each vignette was modeled after each of the 15 items from Tepper's scale, there were 5 items from the scale that represented overt abuse and 5 items that represented covert abuse. Tepper's categorizations of these items were based on the exploratory factor analysis conducted by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007). After aggregating the responses of participants only for their perceptions of the overt and covert items separately, I then ran a new linear regression that measured each trait's relationship with specifically the overt and covert items (Table 3). I was able to identify Machiavellianism and narcissism as significant predictors for perceptions of overt abuse, and conscientiousness as a significant predictor for covert abuse.

Big Five and Perceptions of Abuse

Aside from conscientious approaching significance, there proved to be no main effect for any of the 4 traits from the Big Five when compared to overall perceptions of abuse. Thus, hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4 were not supported. Consequently, the traits of conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness were also placed into a linear regression model with the overt and covert divisions of vignettes as delineated by Tepper's original scale. These new analyses resulted in conscientiousness ($B = -.17$, $p = < .05$) as a significant predictor for covert abuse. There was also a high level of variation in means for the responses of vignettes when compared among the traits.

Dark Triad and Perceptions of Abuse

All three hypotheses for the Dark Triad traits showed that no significant correlation was found between Machiavellianism, psychopathy, or narcissism and overall perceptions of abuse, thus not supporting hypotheses 5, 6, and 7. When the same three traits were placed into linear regression models separately predicting overt and covert items from the scale, Machiavellianism

($B = .64$, $p = < .05$) and narcissism ($B = .06$, $p = < .05$) were significant predictors of overt abuse. However, when all three traits were combined in a linear regression model for overt and covert perceptions of abuse there were no robust predictors. It is believed that this difference in variance can be explained by the high correlation between all three variables (Table 2), which is why each deviant trait was looked at separately. A high level of variation in means for each vignette occurred across the three traits as well.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the influence of individual differences on the perception of abusive supervision in the workplace. The results indicated that no significant correlations were found between the 7 individual differences examined and the overall perception of abuse. However, when overt abuse and covert abuse were examined separately, it was found that a positive correlation existed between Machiavellianism and narcissism for overt abuse, and a negative correlation existed for conscientiousness and covert abuse. The findings with narcissism partially support hypothesis 5 as well as the previous study by Harvey et al. (2014), where they found entitlement to be a significant predictor for individuals perceiving their supervisor as abusive. The results showed conscientiousness as having a negative correlation, thus partially contradicting hypothesis 4 and other studies in relation to perceptions of mistreatment that have found a positive correlation for this trait (e.g., Sliter et al., 2015; Rada-Bayne, 2018). Little to no significant findings have been found in relation to Machiavellianism and abuse, but the results partially disprove hypothesis 6 that there would be a negative correlation.

There was also distinctive variability in perceptions of the vignettes. The means of perceived abuse on the individual item level were different for each vignette depending on the trait in question. For example, respondents high in conscientiousness rated vignette 4 to be more abusive on average than individuals high in the other 6 traits did. These differences may be present due to the context of the vignette in focus, with possibly certain contextual instances being more triggering to individuals high in certain traits. In addition, the means of overall, overt, and covert abuse all partially support the notion that abusive acts can be ambiguous as the

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average respondent took a middle ground approach to labeling the act as abusive or non-abusive (Table 6).

Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations to the study that may have influenced the overall results. Firstly, although the vignettes were constructed to model each of the items from Tepper's abusive supervision scale, it is possible that the items from the scale lost their potency or effect when placed in these fictitious scenarios. Each scenario contained several sentences, whereas the items on Tepper's scale were a few words with little to no context. The added context to each item could have distorted or misrepresented what Tepper intended to represent within each item, thus allowing respondents to develop a different perception of the event when the vignette was present.

The second limitation to the study involved the use of Amazon's Mechanical Turk service (MTurk). With some of the respondents of the survey being located outside of the United States, it is possible that their data would have influenced the results in either direction. Because of cultural differences in workplace settings across the globe, it is likely that differences in perception would result. Since the study at hand did not intend to tackle cross-cultural issues, having people from other countries may have influenced the results.

It is also worth noting that MTurk has recently been having issues with bots and other forms of artificial intelligence (AI) taking the surveys of researchers. To limit the amount of fraudulent data, 5 attention checks were scattered randomly across the questionnaires. If any given respondent failed at least 1 attention check, they were omitted from the study. Although

each of the surveys were looked at meticulously, it is possible that a small number of surveys used in the sample could have been taken by AI. If the study were to be repeated with the use of MTurk for survey distribution, it would be highly advised to make even more rigid restrictions on which individuals can partake in the study to avoid these potential issues.

There are several directions for research that could be followed as a result of the study at hand. One direction would be to further examine abusive supervision with the divisions of overt and covert abuse. Overt and covert measures in the past have been used to find useful discoveries in relation to abuse, such as in the form of racism (Weitz, 1972), so it is worth considering using this delineation for future studies that involve mistreatment. In addition, the use of vignettes is a measure that can help better identify specified behaviors and could prove to be useful in more studies pertaining to mistreatment and individual differences.

Another direction for future research would be to continue to look at abuse through a lens of ambiguity. Although other forms of mistreatment like incivility have already done this, I believe that it could be transferable to the abusive supervision literature. With rapidly changing societal norms impacting work-related interactions, it is important to better understand what is and is not considered abusive behavior from supervisors. As mentioned earlier, a gap in the research is present in this regard as Tepper states there is a "fuzzy line" separating abrasive and abusive behavior (Tepper et al., 2017, p. 128). His model further explains that supervisor behavior, subordinate characteristics, and contextual factors are what determine whether someone labels an act as abrasive or abusive. I believe that this model should be further investigated in an effort to better understand the cognitive labeling of abusive supervision.

Conclusion

Almost all previous research on abusive supervision has proceeded under the assumption that the various forms of mistreatment are uniformly perceived as negative by recipients. Many researchers failed to ask is whether it is reality that every questionable act labeled as abusive is truly abuse, or such perceptions vary across individuals. And for the individuals perceiving the act (the target), what individual differences are influencing their judgement. The current study aimed to address both of those questions. Although no significant findings were found for any of the individual differences chosen in relation to overall abuse, the results did partially support other questions in relation to abusive supervision that could further improve our understanding.

Although it may not be common for an employee to experience abusive supervision, the effects can prove to be severe and long-lasting. Abusive supervision can result in lower levels of morale, mental health, executive functioning, and an increase in CWBs and quitting (Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017, p. 125). These negative outcomes can affect not only individuals, but the overall productivity and success of any company. It is important to better understand the process of abusive supervision because the perceptions of individuals will continue to influence the reality of what is considered abuse and who in any workplace setting is regarded as an abusive supervisor.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistencies

Variable	Mean	SD	Possible Range	Observed Range	Alpha
Abusive Vignette					
Overall	2.73	.48	1 – 4	1.13 – 4.0	.83
Overt	2.88	.59	1 – 4	1 – 4	.75
Covert	2.76	.54	1 – 4	1.20 – 4	.60
Dark Triad					
Machiavellianism	5.16	1.62	1 – 7	1 – 7	.90
Narcissism	4.88	1.65	1 – 7	1.25 - 7	.89
Psychopathy	5.24	1.37	1 – 7	1.50 – 7	.80
Big Five					
Neuroticism	2.39	.93	1 – 5	1 – 4.5	.90
Extraversion	3.08	.92	1 – 5	1.30 – 5	.89
Agreeableness	3.86	0.69	1 – 5	1.90 – 5	.84
Conscientiousness	3.94	0.68	1 – 5	2.20 – 5	.87

Table 2. Intercorrelations among Variables

Variables:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Overall Abuse	-									
2. Overt Abuse Vignettes	.842**	-								
3. Covert Abuse Vignettes	.872**	.625**	-							
4. Machiavellianism	.130	.176*	.144	-						
5. Narcissism	.071	.173*	.092	.664**	-					
6. Psychopathy	.100	.135	.123	.759**	.552**	-				
7. Neuroticism	.119	.058	.069	-.159	-.074	-.194*	-			
8. Extraversion	-.013	-.041	.006	-.074	-.348**	.086	-.407**	-		
9. Agreeableness	-.035	.027	-.020	.509**	.371**	.617**	-.392**	.142	-	
10. Conscientiousness	-.113	-.022	-.087	.464**	.284**	.490**	-.445**	.229**	.401**	-

Note. **: Correlation is significant at $p < .01$ (2-tailed). *: Correlation is significant at $p < .05$ (2-tailed). N = 134.

Table 3. Effects of Personality Traits on Perceptions of Abuse

	Overall			Overt			Covert		
Variable	B	SE	p	B	SE	p	B	SE	P
Neuroticism	.04	.06	.51	.03	.07	.68	.01	.06	.86
Extraversion	.05	.06	.42	.04	.07	.54	.06	.07	.39
Agreeableness	-.08	.08	.31	-.07	.10	.51	-.11	.09	.23
Conscientiousness	-.15	.08	.06	-.11	.10	.27	-.17	.09	.05
Machiavellianism	.06	.04	.16	.06	.06	.31	.07	.05	.20
Narcissism	.00	.04	.98	.05	.05	.32	.01	.04	.83
Psychopathy	.04	.05	.43	.03	.07	.71	.06	.06	.33
R^2	.08			.06			.07		

Note. N = 134. Unstandardized beta is provided with standard error.

Table 4. Effects of Big Five Traits on Perceptions of Abuse

Variable	Overall			Overt			Covert		
	B	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*
Neuroticism	.06	.45	.29	.04	.56	.53	.04	.06	.56
Extraversion	.03	.06	.61	-.01	.07	.84	.03	.06	.63
Agreeableness	.03	.07	.70	.05	.09	.54	.02	.08	.76
Conscientiousness	-.06	.07	.38	-.01	.09	.91	-.07	.08	.43
R^2	.02			.01			.01		

Note. n = 134. Unstandardized beta is provided with standard error.

Table 5. Effects of Dark Triad on Perceptions of Abuse

Variable	Overall			Overt			Covert		
	b	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*B*	*SE*	*p*
Machiavellianism	.04	.04	.34	.04	.05	.45	.04	.05	.40
Narcissism	.00	.05	.96	-.01	.06	.96	.01	.05	.80
Psychopathy	-.01	.03	.81	.04	.04	.38	-.00	.04	.93
R^2	.02			.04			.02		

Note. n = 134. Unstandardized beta is provided with standard error. When placed into own equation: Mach. ((B = .64, p = < .05) and narcissism (B = .06, p = < .05).

Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations of Vignettes for Overall Abuse Perception

Vignette	Mean	SD
Vig 1	3.08	.08
Vig 2	2.83	.88
Vig 3	2.50	.99
Vig 4	2.50	.93
Vig 5	2.90	.90
Vig 6	2.16	.96
Vig 7	3.00	.92
Vig 8	2.37	.80
Vig 9	3.22	.80
Vig 10	2.89	.91
Vig 11	2.86	.90
Vig 12	3.21	.80
Vig 13	2.00	.89
Vig 14	3.16	.72
Vig 15	2.34	.96

APPENDIX A: ABUSIVE SUPERVISION VIGNETTES

Abusive Supervision vignettes (15 items)

From Tepper 2015

Instructions: "How abusive was the act that occurred?"

Abusive supervision perceptions will be assessed for each vignette using a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all abusive, 4 = extremely abusive). Responses are combined across vignettes to develop an abusive supervision score.

1. Your supervisor calls you in their office to have a talk with you. They talk to you in depth about everything you are doing well on, as well as everything you have been doing poor on. Somewhere throughout your 20-minute discussion about the various tasks you are performing, they ridicule you.

2. Your supervisor schedules a meeting with you at 3pm in the conference room to discuss potential ideas for an upcoming project. You share with your supervisor all the ideas and creative insights you came up with throughout the week. Although the meeting went well for the most part, your supervisor told you that one of your ideas was stupid.

3. Your supervisor gives you the silent treatment. At first, you are unsure as to why they are doing this. But after more time passes throughout the day you realize that they must be upset with you about a mistake you made the day before.

4. During a meeting your supervisor goes off on a tangent and tells everyone an embarrassing story of you from several years ago in the office and everyone laughs.

5. Twice a week you and your supervisor have lunch at the same time. You typically both sit together in the breakroom while eating your lunches. During these encounters you both talk for half of the time and sit in silence playing on your phones for the other half. Sometimes however, your boss invades your privacy. When you are playing on your phone you realize that your supervisor is looking over your shoulder at the various text messages you are sending to other people.

6. Your supervisor tosses an assignment on your desk and simply says "Do this by tomorrow". Before walking away, they remind you of your most recent failure and say that you better not make any mistakes this time.

7. You and one other coworker are the only two members of the sales department that were able to reach their quota for the month of October. In the middle of the day while everyone is working at their desks, your supervisor comes out of their office and walks over to your coworker to commend them on their great work for the month. Your supervisor then goes back in their office and never says anything to you.

8. Your supervisor's boss assigns you and your supervisor to collaborate on a complex project together. You contribute a lot to the project and find out a lot of information you think will be

useful for the company. When your supervisor's boss returns the next week to discuss the results of the project, they say that the information you both collected is not quite what they were looking for. Your supervisor blames you for all of the inaccurate information that was collected even though they were equally responsible.

9. Your supervisor promises you a raise for the third time this month and that it will be coming your way by the end of the week. When Friday arrives you subtly remind your supervisor about the raise they promised, and they tell you that it's no longer possible without any further explanation.

10. Earlier in the day, your supervisor receives a call saying that his home had been broken into. After lunch you need to ask your supervisor a couple important questions regarding a client. When you go to talk to your supervisor in their office, they get so angry for you bothering them that they yell at you and tell you to leave.

11. While you are sitting at your desk you notice that your supervisor is talking to another coworker on the other side of the office. Throughout their conversation you briefly hear your name come up. You later approach your coworker and they inform you that your supervisor was making jokes about you.

12. You happen to hold the door for your supervisor at least three times a week; your supervisor always walks right on through without acknowledging you.

13. Every Friday your supervisor allows you and your coworkers to dress in jeans and socialize more throughout the day as long as everyone stays productive. Although your supervisor is lenient for when everyone else is talking, you notice that many of the times that you are found talking with your coworkers, they tell you to get back to work.

14. Your supervisor gives you a special task of booking their plane ticket to Boston for a conference but says to only buy a ticket under a certain price limit. After having difficulty finding a cheap enough ticket to meet your supervisor's request, you end up just booking a flight that is slightly over their budget because there are no other options. When you go to inform your supervisor of the bad news, they tell you that you are incompetent.

15. When you return from the bathroom, you find out that your supervisor took everyone's coffee order and went on a coffee run. When the supervisor returns, they have coffee for everyone but you. When you ask your supervisor if they forgot about you, they lie and say that they thought you did not want any.

NOTE: Based on the exploratory factor analysis by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) Items 1, 2, 4, 11, and 14 were treated as overt abusive supervision and items 5, 7, 8, 9, and 15 were treated as covert abusive supervision. All other items were not included in these subscales.

APPENDIX B: PERSONALITY/BIG FOUR SCALE

Personality/Big Five scale (40 items)

From Goldberg et al., 2006

Instructions: On the following pages, there are phrases describing people's behaviors. Please use the rating scale below to describe how accurately each statement describes you. Describe yourself as you generally are now, not as you wish to be in the future. Describe yourself as you honestly see yourself, in relation to other people you know of the same sex as you are, and roughly your same age. So that you can describe yourself in an honest manner, your responses will be kept in absolute confidence. Please read each statement carefully, and then choose the option that corresponds to the number on the scale.

Response Options: 1: Very Inaccurate, 2: Moderately Inaccurate, 3: Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate, 4: Moderately Accurate, 5: Very Accurate

Note: Because openness was not looked at in the study, the section of questions pertaining to openness were omitted.

Neuroticism 1. *Often feel blue.

2. *Dislike myself.

3. *Am often down in the dumps.

4. *Have frequent mood swings.

5. *Panic easily.

6. Rarely get irritated.

7. Seldom feel blue.

8. Feel comfortable with myself.

9. Am not easily bothered by things.

10. Am very pleased with myself.

Extraversion 11. *Feel comfortable around people.

12. *Make friends easily.

13. *Am skilled in handling social situations.

14. *Am the life of the party.

15. *Know how to captivate people

16. Have little to say.

17. Keep in the background.

18. Would describe my experiences as somewhat dull.

19. Don't like to draw attention to myself.

20. Don't talk a lot.

Agreeableness 21. *Have a good word for everyone.

22. *Believe that others have good intentions.

23. *Respect others.

24. *Accept people as they are.

25. *Make people feel at ease.

26. Have a sharp tongue.

27. Cut others to pieces.

28. Suspect hidden motives in others.

29. Get back at others.

30. Insult people.

Conscientiousness 31. *Am always prepared.

32. *Pay attention to details.

33. *Get chores done right away.

34. *Carry out my plans.

35. *Make plans and stick to them.

36. Waste my time.

37. Find it difficult to get down to work.

38. Do just enough work to get by.

39. Don't see things through.

40. Shirk my duties.

*Positively keyed items

Scoring Instructions:

1. For + keyed items, the response "Very Inaccurate" is assigned a value of 1, "Moderately Inaccurate" a value of 2, "Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate" a 3, "Moderately Accurate" a 4, and "Very Accurate" a value of 5.

2. For - keyed items, the response "Very Inaccurate" is assigned a value of 5, "Moderately Inaccurate" a value of 4, "Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate" a 3, "Moderately Accurate" a 2, and "Very Accurate" a value of 1.

3. Once numbers are assigned for all of the items in the scale, just sum all the values to obtain a total scale score.

APPENDIX C: THE DARK TRIAD/DIRTY DOZEN SCALE

The Dark Triad/Dirty Dozen Scale (12 items)

From Jonasen & Webster, 2010

Instructions: On the following pages, there are phrases describing people's behaviors. Please use the rating scale below to describe how accurately each statement describes you. Describe yourself as you generally are now, not as you wish to be in the future. Describe yourself as you honestly see yourself, in relation to other people you know of the same sex as you are, and roughly your same age. So that you can describe yourself in an honest manner, your responses will be kept in absolute confidence. Please read each statement carefully, and then choose the option that corresponds to the number on the scale.

Response options: 1(disagree strongly) – 9 (agree strongly)

Machiavellianism:

1. I tend to manipulate others to get my way.

2. I have used deceit or lied to get my way.

3. I have use flattery to get my way.

4. I tend to exploit others towards my own end.

Psychopathy:

5. I tend to lack remorse.

6. I tend to be unconcerned with the morality of my actions.

7. I tend to be callous or insensitive.

8. I tend to be cynical.

Narcissism:

9. I tend to want others to admire me.

10. I tend to want others to pay attention to me.

11. I tend to seek prestige or status.

12. I tend to expect special favors from others.

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