

PREDICTORS OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION: SUPERVISOR PERCEPTIONS OF DEEP-LEVEL DISSIMILARITY, RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT, AND SUBORDINATE PERFORMANCE

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The moral exclusion literature identifies three previously unexamined predictors of abusive supervision: supervisor perceptions of deep-level dissimilarity, relationship conflict, and subordinate performance. Invoking theory and research on workplace diversity, relationship conflict, and victim precipitation, we model the three predictors as associated with abusive supervision. Path-analytic tests using data collected from supervisor-subordinate dyads at two time points suggest that supervisor perceptions of relationship conflict and subordinate performance mediate the relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision and that relationship conflict mediates that between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision when supervisors perceive subordinates as having low performance.

Estimates suggest that more than 13 percent of working people in the United States become targets of abusive supervision, or nonphysical hostility perpetrated by employees' immediate superiors (Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006). Examples of behaviors that fall within the abusive supervision content domain include undermining, public denigration, and explosive outbursts (Tepper, 2007). Sustained exposure to abusive supervision is associated with serious negative outcomes for victims and employers, including psychological distress (Tepper, 2000), problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006), and aggression directed against a victim's supervisor (Dupre, Inness, Connelly, Barling, & Hopton, 2006; Inness, Barling, & Turner, 2005), employer (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), and family (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). These consequences translate into annual losses of an estimated \$23.8 billion in increased health care costs, workplace withdrawal, and lost productivity (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006).

Far less is known about the conditions that predict the occurrence of abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007). Indeed, only three published studies have

investigated the antecedents of abusive supervision (i.e., Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Tepper et al., 2006). In all three, researchers framed abusive supervision as a response to supervisor perceptions of mistreatment by their employer. This research has helped explain why supervisors may be inclined to downward hostility in general, but little is known about the reasons supervisors abuse specific subordinates.

To explore that question, we invoke concepts described in the moral exclusion literature (Opotow, 1990a, 1995), which examines the factors that influence whether moral considerations apply to specific social targets. According to Opotow, each person has a *scope of justice*, a psychological boundary separating targets that are perceived as deserving fair treatment and to which moral rules apply (i.e., those morally included in the scope of justice) and targets for which justice concerns are perceived to be irrelevant (i.e., those morally excluded from the scope of justice). As Opotow and Weiss put it, "Norms, moral rules, and concerns about rights and fairness govern our conduct toward those inside our scope of justice," [but those who are morally excluded are perceived to be] "expendable, undeserving, exploitable, and irrelevant" (2000: 478). Morally excluded targets, in turn, become likely candidates for "exclusionary prac-

We thank Micki Kacmar and three anonymous reviewers for many helpful comments that they provided on earlier versions of this article.

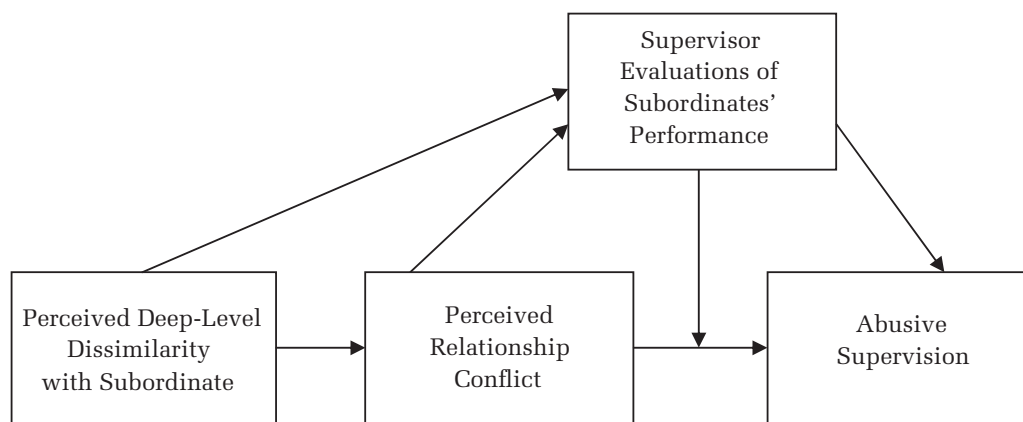
tices," various forms of hostility and mistreatment that range from mild (e.g., rudeness [Opotow, 2001]) to severe (e.g., violations of fundamental human rights [Opotow, 1990a]). Of direct relevance to the focus of our research, supervisors execute abusive acts against targets who are morally excluded from the supervisors' scope of justice (Opotow, 1995). Hence, a promising approach to modeling the abuse of specific subordinates involves incorporating the precursors of moral exclusion.

What factors cause targets to become morally excluded from an agent's scope of justice and, in turn, to become targets for mistreatment? The moral exclusion literature focuses on three recurring themes: (1) perceived dissimilarity to targets, (2) conflict with the targets, and (3) the targets' usefulness or "utility" (Hafer & Olson, 2003). An individual becomes a target of hostile behavior when a perpetrator perceives the target to be dissimilar, when the perpetrator is in conflict with the target, and when the target is not useful or is even injurious to the perpetrator. We identified supervisor-subordinate analogs of these three factors to explore the predictors of abusive supervision. The respective analogs for dissimilarity, conflict, and utility are a supervisor's perceived deep-level dissimilarity with a subordinate, perceived relationship conflict with the subordinate, and evaluation of the subordinate's performance. Perceived deep-level dissimilarity refers to the perception that the subordinate's values and attitudes differ from the supervisor's (Harrison & Klein, 2007). Perceived relationship conflict with the subordinate refers to negative social interactions, interpersonal incompatibility, and negative affect in the form of frustration, irritation, and annoyance (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Subordinate performance evaluation cap-

tures the supervisor's perception that the subordinate meets performance standards on required or in-role tasks. Because our interest is in predicting supervisors' mistreatment of subordinates and because people react more strongly to their perception of their environment rather than to its objective features (Lewin, 1951), we focus on supervisor *perceptions* of dissimilarity, relationship conflict, and subordinate performance.

The moral exclusion theory (Opotow, 1990a, 1995) prediction is that abusive supervision is positively related to perceived deep-level dissimilarity and supervisor perceptions of relationship conflict with subordinates, and negatively related to supervisor evaluations of subordinate performance. However, contributions to three bodies of theory and research suggest a more complicated set of interrelationships and corresponding predictions. These research streams are the workplace diversity literature, which examines the effects of supervisor-subordinate dissimilarity on dyadic and individual attitudes and well-being (Harrison & Klein, 2007; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998); the work on conflict in interpersonal relations, which examines the emergence and consequences of frustration and negative interaction between coworkers (Jehn & Mannix, 2001); and the victim precipitation literature, which examines the characteristics that put people at risk of mistreatment (Elias, 1986; Olweus, 1978). We invoked and integrated concepts from these literatures to develop and test a new model of abusive supervision. According to our model, which is depicted in Figure 1, supervisors experience relationship conflict with and assign lower performance evaluations to subordinates who are perceived to be dissimilar, which, in turn, is associated with subordinates' reports that they have been the target of abusive supervision. The model

FIGURE 1
Hypothesized Model



also specifies that the indirect effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity through relationship conflict is stronger when supervisors perceive subordinates to be poorer performers.

We contribute to management theory by developing and testing a model of abusive supervision that incorporates factors that have been identified in the moral exclusion literature and processes described in theory and research on workplace diversity, relationship conflict, and victim precipitation. In so doing, we demonstrate the usefulness of using moral exclusion concepts to predict a costly form of antisocial organizational behavior. We also enrich and sharpen moral exclusion theory by introducing fine-grained predictions regarding the roles that dissimilarity, conflict, and utility play in explaining supervisors' exclusionary practices. In the following sections, we explain the conceptual bases for the linkages depicted in our hypothesized model. We then present the results of a study in which we tested our predictions using two-wave data collected from matched pairs of supervisors and subordinates.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Perceived Deep-Level Dissimilarity and Abusive Supervision

Extant studies of diversity in supervisor-subordinate dyads have examined relationships between dissimilarity and an assortment of attitudinal, relational, and behavioral outcomes. Some of these studies have focused on surface-level dissimilarity, comprising objective differences in age, gender, and race; others have focused on deep-level dissimilarity, comprising perceived differences in values, attitudes, and personality. As we noted above, we restrict our analysis to perceived deep-level dissimilarity—specifically, the perceptions of supervisors that their attitudes and values differ from those of focal subordinates. As Pulakos and Wexley said, “Actual similarity may not be as important to the process of manager-subordinate interpersonal relations as is perceived similarity of the other person” (1983: 130). The preponderance of relevant empirical work suggests that perceived supervisor-subordinate dissimilarity is associated with unfavorable outcomes, such as lower levels of job satisfaction (Turban & Jones, 1988), lower-quality relationships with supervisors (Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993; Wayne & Liden, 1995), and lower performance evaluations (Huang & Iun, 2006; Liden et al., 1993; Turban & Jones, 1988; Wayne & Liden, 1995).

Could perceived deep-level dissimilarity also be associated with supervisory mistreatment of subor-

dinates? The moral exclusion literature supports this very thesis. Opatow invoked social identity theory to argue that “moral exclusion results from our innate tendency to differentiate objects” (1990a: 7). People categorize others as similar or dissimilar and demonstrate favoritism toward similar others and derogation toward dissimilar others (Brewer, 1999; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Perceived dissimilarity evokes feelings of unconnectedness and indifference to potential threats to focal others' well-being (Deutsch, 1973; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), attitudes that align with the concept of moral exclusion. Indeed, Opatow (1990a, 1995) argued that perpetrators of hostile and aggressive acts against dissimilar others consciously or unconsciously exclude these dissimilar victims from their scope of justice which, in turn, produces exclusionary practices—acts of mistreatment and harm doing. Hence, the moral exclusion literature provides the basis for predicting that supervisors will abuse subordinates they perceive to be dissimilar to themselves.

However, recent contributions to the workplace diversity literature suggest that the role perceived dissimilarity plays in predicting abusive supervision may be less straightforward. This work suggests that under some circumstances diversity may be valued rather than derogated (Homan, Hollenbeck, Humphrey, Van Knippenberg, Ilgen, & Van Kleef, 2008; Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007) and that greater propensity may exist to promote similar others than to derogate those who are different (Halevy, Bornstein, & Sagiv, 2008). Hence, this literature suggests that perceived deep-level dissimilarity may not necessarily be associated with abusive supervision. In the sections that follow, we reconcile this work with moral exclusion theory by proposing that perceived deep-level dissimilarity plays a role in predicting abusive supervision, but not precisely the role that moral exclusion theory specifies. Specifically, we propose that the relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision is indirect, operating through supervisor perceptions of relationship conflict and supervisor evaluations of subordinates' performance.

Mediating Effects of Relationship Conflict

In a review and analysis of the workplace diversity literature, Harrison and Klein (2007) argued that the effects of diversity depend on diversity type. They argue that “separation on an attribute,” a form of diversity that captures deep-level differences, is associated with negative outcomes including distrust, reduced cohesiveness, and conflict.

Perceived deep-level dissimilarity may increase the risk of relationship conflict because dissimilar people are less likely to validate their counterparts' beliefs and values (Byrne, 1971) and because perceived dissimilarity can lead to fundamental differences of opinion vis-à-vis important work-related tasks and goals (Harrison & Klein, 2007; Hobman & Bordia, 2006). In keeping with these arguments, research exploring relationship conflict in groups suggests that perceived deep-level dissimilarity is associated with higher levels of relationship conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Mohammed & Angell, 2004). We predict that a similar effect occurs at the supervisor-subordinate dyad level: supervisors will perceive that the relationship with a focal subordinate involves greater interpersonal conflict when they perceive the subordinate to be dissimilar. Indirect support for this prediction comes from studies suggesting that supervisors are more attracted to and form higher-quality relationships with subordinates they perceive to be similar to themselves (Liden et al., 1993; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2002) and that relationship conflict is lower in higher-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships (Turban, Dougherty, & Lee, 2002).

Perceived relationship conflict with a subordinate will, in turn, be associated with hostility toward the subordinate. According to moral exclusion theory (Opotow, 1990a, 1995), a person involved in conflict develops very different attitudes toward those on the same side of the conflict (i.e., allies) and those on the opposing side (i.e., adversaries). Whereas allies are included in the person's scope of justice and are afforded fair treatment, adversaries are excluded from the person's scope of justice and become probable targets for exclusionary practices. We theorize that in supervisor-subordinate dyads this nexus plays out in an association between relationship conflict and abusive supervision: supervisors position adversarial subordinates beyond the scope of justice, which is associated with exclusionary practices in the form of abusive supervision. The link between relationship conflict and abusive supervision is also consistent with studies suggesting that exposure to interpersonal conflict increases "state negative affect," which translates into hostile actions (e.g., Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Spector, Fox, Penney, Bruursema, Goh, & Kessler, 2006).

Summarizing these arguments, we predict that the relationship conflict that perceived deep-level dissimilarity evokes is related to interpersonal hostility in the form of abusive supervision. That is, relationship conflict mediates the effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision. Furthermore, because we envision multiple

pathways by which perceived deep-level dissimilarity leads to abusive supervision, we conceptualize relationship conflict as a partial mediator of the effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity. Figure 1, our hypothesized model, shows these relationships.

Hypothesis 1. A supervisor's perceptions of relationship conflict partially mediate the relationship between the supervisor's perceived deep-level dissimilarity with a subordinate and abusive supervision directed toward that subordinate.

Mediating Effects of Supervisor Evaluations of Subordinate Performance

We noted earlier that several studies have documented a relationship between supervisor perceptions of deep-level dissimilarity with subordinates and supervisor evaluations of subordinates' performance; supervisors evaluate subordinates who are perceived to be similar to themselves more highly (Liden et al., 1993; Pulakos & Wexley, 1983; Turban & Jones, 1988). Similar subordinates are likely to be evaluated more favorably than their dissimilar counterparts for two reasons. First, in line with the similarity-attraction hypothesis (e.g., Byrne, 1971), individuals are attracted to and render favorable evaluations of similar others because the attitudes of similar others validate the individuals' beliefs. Supervisors evaluate similar subordinates more favorably because doing so is esteem-enhancing. Second, according to social identity and moral exclusion theory, similar subordinates are likely to be perceived as more deserving of fair outcomes and rewards. In contrast, dissimilar subordinates are likely to trigger competitive and discriminatory cognitions along with the perception that they are less deserving of positive outcomes (Clayton & Opotow, 2003; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner, 1982).

Subordinates who are perceived as having lower performance (hence, "lower performers"), in turn become more likely targets for supervisory hostility. From a moral exclusion perspective, supervisors perceive lower performers to be potentially harmful and threatening and to thus have low *utility*. Empirical evidence from the leadership literature supports this thesis: lower performers are more likely to make supervisors look bad, interfere with their capacity to accomplish their work, and take up more of their time addressing the fallout poor performance causes (Bass, 1990). The low utility of subordinates who are perceived to be lower performers positions them beyond their supervisors'

scopes of justice, which puts them at risk of exclusionary practices such as abusive supervision.

The link between performance evaluations and abusive supervision is also consistent with the victim precipitation literature, which examines the individual characteristics and behaviors that put people at risk of becoming the targets of aggressive and hostile responses (Elias, 1986). Potential aggressors choose targets strategically, focusing their hostility on people who seem difficult to like and/or those who appear to be vulnerable and unable to defend themselves. Olweus's (1978) concept of *provocative victims* explains why supervisors might target subordinates with low performance. According to Olweus, people become good targets for victimization when they are perceived to be difficult to work with. In the context of supervisor-subordinate relationships, supervisors should perceive subordinates who are lower performers to be frustrating, aggravating, and annoying—characteristics that align well with the provocative victim profile. Hence, the perception that employees are lower performers has the potential to evoke victimization in the form of abusive supervision. Integrating these arguments with those suggesting a relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and supervisor evaluations of subordinate performance leads us to propose that the unfavorable performance evaluations that perceived deep-level dissimilarity evokes is associated with subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision.

Hypothesis 2. A supervisor's perceptions of a subordinate's performance partially mediate the relationship between the supervisor's perceived deep-level dissimilarity with the subordinate and abusive supervision directed toward that subordinate.

Although researchers have failed to link supervisor-subordinate relationship conflict with supervisor perceptions of subordinate performance, extant research suggests that subordinates in higher-quality working relationships with their supervisors are evaluated more favorably than those who are involved in lower-quality relationships with their supervisors (e.g., Huang & Iun, 2006; Judge & Ferris, 1993; Kolodinsky, Treadway, & Ferris, 2007). The rationale for this link is that lower-quality working relationships involve more conflictive interaction, which colors individuals' perceptions of their counterparts' capability and effectiveness. In supervisor-subordinate relationships characterized by higher levels of relationship conflict, supervisors should be more likely to "see" performance problems because of "negative halo" and inability

to reconcile a conflictive relationship with good performance. Thus, supervisors are likely to perceive employees with whom they have conflict as being poor performers. In addition, based on the work suggesting that conflictive relationships motivate people to injure their counterparts (Struch & Schwartz, 1989), it can be argued that supervisors use performance evaluation processes to injure subordinates with whom they are in conflict. We therefore expect that the relationship conflict that perceived deep-level dissimilarity evokes will, in turn, be associated with lower evaluations of subordinate performance. Integrating these arguments with those suggesting a relationship between supervisor evaluations of subordinate performance and abusive supervision (i.e., the conceptual basis for Hypothesis 2), we propose that the lower performance evaluations relationship conflict evokes are associated with abusive supervision. This line of reasoning is depicted in Figure 1 as a mediation chain in which perceived deep-level dissimilarity is positively associated with relationship conflict; relationship conflict is negatively related to supervisor evaluations of subordinate performance; and supervisor evaluations of subordinate performance are, in turn, negatively related to abusive supervision. In the parlance of Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998) and Fletcher (2006), relationship conflict is a *distal mediator* and subordinate performance is a *proximal mediator* in the relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision.

Hypothesis 3. Relationship conflict is a distal partial mediator and supervisor evaluation of subordinate performance is a proximal partial mediator of the relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision.

Moderating Effects of Subordinate Performance

In the conceptual frame associated with Hypothesis 1, we argue that supervisors exclude from their scope of justice subordinates they perceive to be adversaries—those with whom they have relationship conflict. This dynamic, in turn, is associated with hostility in the form of abusive supervision. Here we qualify that prediction by proposing that some subordinate adversaries are included in a supervisor's scope of justice and therefore do not become targets of abusive supervision. Specifically, we argue that subordinate adversaries are perceived to deserve fair treatment when they are good ("higher") performers.

Supervisors should process relationship conflict with subordinates differently when they respect

their ability and competence. Adversaries who are perceived to be capable should evoke more respect than adversaries who appear less competent. This is because parties to relationship conflict are more likely to perceive competent adversaries' positions as deriving from reasoned and thoughtful processes (Bush & Folger, 1994). Indeed, one way of inducing cooperation between adversaries is to encourage one party's perception that the other party is capable and worthy (Ting-Toomey, 1999). We do not mean to imply that supervisors will have no animus toward adversarial subordinates who perform well, only that they will view those subordinates as more deserving of fair treatment than low performers subordinate adversaries. Hence, when relationship conflict is higher, supervisors are more likely to execute exclusionary acts such as abusive supervision against low-performing subordinates.

These arguments imply that the mediated effect captured in Hypothesis 1 varies over levels of supervisor perceptions of subordinate performance. The positive relationship between perceived relationship conflict (which perceived deep-level dissimilarity evokes) and abusive supervision is stronger when supervisors perceive subordinates to be lower performers. Predictions of this sort are referred to as second-stage moderation models in which a mediated effect varies over levels of a moderator that operates at the second stage of the mediated relationship (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Stated formally:

Hypothesis 4. Supervisor perceptions of subordinate performance moderate the indirect effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision (through relationship conflict); the mediated effect is stronger when a supervisor perceives a subordinate as having lower performance.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited from seven health care organizations, including hospitals, long-term care facilities, and outpatient facilities, located in the southeastern United States. We contacted key individuals with administrative responsibilities (e.g., unit directors, directors of human resources, and chief operating officers) and asked them for assistance in identifying and recruiting supervisor-subordinate dyads in their organizations.

Though the procedures varied slightly across organizations, the overall data collection strategy was as follows: Volunteers from the ranks of both managerial and nonmanagerial employees were sought

through e-mail notifications, announcements at staff meetings, and/or the distribution of flyers. Once volunteers were identified, we matched each supervisor with a volunteering subordinate. When multiple subordinates matched with a supervisor, we chose one participating subordinate randomly. Participants completed surveys during work hours on two occasions separated by six weeks. One of the authors was present to explain the purpose of the study and to administer surveys. In the rare cases in which no author was available during formal survey administration, a contact in the organization assisted in administering the survey.

Supervisors and subordinates completed the surveys at separate times in separate locations. Before administering the survey, we told each group that we were conducting a study on various aspects of supervisor-subordinate relationships. Supervisors were told that one of their subordinates would be participating, and subordinates were told that their supervisor would be participating. Although each knew the identity of the other, all participants were assured that their individual results would not be shared with their supervisors or anyone else in their organization. They were told that supervisors and subordinates from multiple health care organizations would be participating and that we would use only aggregated data.

These data collection procedures produced usable data from 183 independent supervisor-subordinate dyads. Across the seven organizations from which we collected data, the participation rate of those in supervisory positions ranged from 42 to 95 percent, with an average of 61 percent. The supervisors' average age was 46 years; 69 percent were women; 28 percent identified themselves as white; 29 percent, as Hispanic; 39 percent, as black; 3 percent, as Asian; and 1 percent, as "other." They averaged 8.67 years working in the organization and were employed as physicians, nursing supervisors, technical department managers (e.g., imaging, lab services), physical plant supervisors, department directors, and higher-level hospital administrators. "Executive/upper management positions" were reported by 34 percent; 45 percent were in "middle management"; and 21 percent held "lower-level" supervisory positions.

The subordinates' average age was 44 years; 77 percent were women; 17 percent identified themselves as white; 39 percent, as Hispanic; 39 percent, as black; 4 percent, as Asian; and less than 2 percent, as "other." Their average tenure in the organization was 8.45 years, and they averaged 4.33 years of working for their supervisor. They occupied a variety of positions, including nurse, technician, food service employee, physical plant em-

ployee, and higher-level employee reporting directly to upper and middle management supervisors.

Measures

Perceived dissimilarity with subordinate. At time 1, supervisors completed Turban and Jones's (1988) three-item measure of perceived similarity with subordinate and two additional items written and used by Liden et al. (1993). The items, prefaced with the phrase "This subordinate and I . . .," read as follows: "are similar in terms of our outlook, perspective, and values," "analyze problems in a similar way," "think alike in terms of coming up with a similar solution for a problem," "are alike in a number of areas," and "see things in much the same way" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). We recoded ratings on the items so that higher ratings captured higher levels of perceived dissimilarity and averaged the answers on items to form total scores for perceived dissimilarity ($\alpha = .96$).

Relationship conflict. At time 1, supervisors responded to three items from Jehn and Mannix (2001). This scale, typically used to measure intra-group conflict, was adapted for use in this study. The items were preceded with the instruction, "Please refer to your employee, _____, when answering the following questions." The three items were, "How much relationship tension is there between you and this employee?"; "How often do you and this employee get angry while working?"; "How much emotional conflict is there between you and this employee?" (1 = "none," 5 = "a lot"). We averaged the item scores to form total scores for relationship conflict ($\alpha = .81$).

Subordinate performance. At time 2, the supervisors completed a four-item measure of subordinates' performance developed by Liden et al. (1993). The items and response scales were as follows: "My subordinate is superior to other subordinates that I've supervised before" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"); "Rate the overall level of performance that you observe for this subordinate" (1 = "unacceptable," 7 = "outstanding"); "What is your personal view of your subordinate in terms of his or her overall effectiveness?" (1 = "very ineffective," 7 = "very effective"); and "Overall to what extent do you feel your subordinate has been effectively fulfilling his or her roles and responsibilities?" (1 = "not effectively at all," 7 = "very effectively"). We averaged the item ratings to form total scores for subordinate performance ($\alpha = .87$).

Abusive supervision. Also at time 2, subordinates completed Tepper's (2000) 15-item measure of abusive supervision. Respondents used a five-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," to report how often their boss used behaviors such as "tells me my thoughts and feelings are stupid," "puts me down in front of others," "ridicules me," and "makes negative comments about me to others." We averaged the item ratings to form total scores for abusive supervision ($\alpha = .96$).

Control variables. We explored the viability of several control variables that could provide alternative explanations for the relationships depicted in our model. These included surface demographic diversity (i.e., sex similarity, age similarity, and race similarity), supervisor-subordinate relationship tenure, and organization. Although researchers have shown that surface demographic variables relate to relational outcomes (e.g., Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989), substantial evidence suggests that the effects of surface demography diminish over time as individuals learn more about each other (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002). Even though the average relationship tenure in our sample was almost 4.5 years, some manager-subordinate dyads in the sample had worked together for less time, so it was prudent to control for surface-level demographic characteristics as well as relationship tenure. The demographic variables were coded as follows: *sex similarity* was 0 when a supervisor and subordinate were of different sexes and 1 when they were the same; *race similarity* was coded 0 for different races and 1 for the same; and age similarity was equal to the absolute value of the difference between the supervisor's age and the subordinate's age. *Relationship tenure* was the number of years the subordinate had reported directly to the supervisor. Finally, because our sample included seven organizations that might have different cultures and orientations to diversity, we also created six dummy-coded variables and entered these terms in our analyses before exploring the effects of our substantive variables.

Analytical Strategy

We tested our hypotheses using path-analytic procedures for testing mediation models from MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, and Sheets (2002) and Edwards and Lambert's (2007) elaboration of those procedures, which allow examination of second-stage moderation models. The Appendix shows the regression equations that we estimated

and the specific terms we examined to test Hypotheses 1 through 4. The examination of mediated and moderated effects requires estimating product terms, which are not normally distributed (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Hence, we tested all hypothesized effects by constructing bias-corrected confidence intervals from 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Mooney & Duval, 1993; Shrout & Bolger, 2002).

RESULTS

We conducted a preliminary analysis to assess differences on the substantive variables among the seven organizations in our study. One-way analyses of variance suggested no mean differences for perceived deep-level dissimilarity ($F[6, 170] = 0.76$, n.s.), perceived relationship conflict ($F[6, 170] = 0.41$, n.s.), supervisor evaluations of subordinate performance ($F[6, 170] = 1.34$, n.s.), and abusive supervision ($F[6, 170] = 1.51$, n.s.). We also computed intraclass coefficients for the four substantive variables to determine whether it was more appropriate to analyze the data using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression or a multilevel modeling technique that can account for nonindependence among observations. The ICC1s were .00 for perceived deep-level dissimilarity and perceived relationship conflict, .02 for subordinates' performance evaluations, and .03 for abusive supervision. Because no variance in perceived deep-level dissimilarity or relationship conflict resided between groups, we could assume that nesting within organizations had no effect on their relationships with

each other, with subordinate performance evaluations, or with abusive supervision. We therefore concluded that it was acceptable to test the hypotheses using OLS regression.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables. Perceived dissimilarity correlated positively with relationship conflict ($r = .40$, $p < .01$) and abusive supervision ($r = .29$, $p < .01$) and negatively with subordinate performance evaluations ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$); relationship conflict correlated negatively with subordinate performance evaluations ($r = -.31$, $p < .01$) and positively with abusive supervision ($r = .37$, $p < .01$); and subordinate performance evaluations correlated negatively with abusive supervision ($r = -.39$, $p < .01$). None of the control variables were related to perceived dissimilarity, relationship conflict, performance evaluations, or abusive supervision. Indeed, including the controls in the regression analyses did not affect the results. We therefore followed Becker's (2005) recommendation to report the results excluding the control variables.

We centered all variables at their grand means before evaluating the regression equations. Table 2 shows the unstandardized regression results. The equations explained significant variance in relationship conflict ($F[1, 175] = 35.49$, $R^2 = .17$, $p < .01$), subordinate performance ($F[2, 174] = 14.80$, $R^2 = .15$, $p < .01$), and abusive supervision ($F[4, 172] = 35.49$, $R^2 = .37$, $p < .01$). The signs on the unstandardized regression coefficients suggest that perceived dissimilarity positively predicted rela-

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables^a

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Sex similarity	0.72	0.45															
2. Age difference	9.58	8.67	-.04														
3. Race similarity	0.57	0.50	.01	-.02													
4. Relationship length	4.46	5.07	.19**	-.11	.00												
5. Organization 1	0.08	0.27	.04	.12	.09	-.17*											
6. Organization 2	0.10	0.29	.11	.05	.01	-.04	-.10										
7. Organization 3	0.03	0.18	-.09	.01	-.03	-.10	-.06	-.06									
8. Organization 4	0.12	0.32	.10	.04	-.07	.12	-.11	-.12	-.07								
9. Organization 5	0.13	0.33	.16*	.17*	.02	.02	-.05	-.12	-.07	-.14							
10. Organization 6	0.46	0.50	-.19*	-.25**	-.06	.11	-.27**	-.30**	-.17*	-.34**	-.35**						
11. Organization 7	0.09	0.29	-.07	.03	.08	-.11	-.09	-.10	-.06	-.12	-.12	-.29**					
12. Dissimilarity	3.52	1.75	.14	.13	-.02	.08	-.05	.08	-.01	-.03	.07	.02	-.11	(.96)			
13. Relationship conflict	1.42	0.64	.02	-.09	.07	.11	.05	.04	-.03	-.08	-.09	.08	-.02	.40**	(.81)		
14. Performance	5.61	1.00	-.14	-.01	.09	.09	-.07	.02	-.08	.04	-.13	.07	.08	-.29**	-.31**	(.87)	
15. Abusive supervision	1.27	0.47	.00	.06	.08	-.09	.03	-.11	.01	-.04	.09	.08	-.10	.29**	.37**	-.39**	(.96)

^a Sample sizes on the correlations range from 143 to 178. At time 1, supervisors completed the measures of perceived dissimilarity with subordinate and perceived relationship conflict with subordinate. At time 2, supervisors completed the measure of subordinates' performance and subordinates completed the measure of abusive supervision.

Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients appear on the main diagonal.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

TABLE 2
Path-Analytic Regression Results^a

Predictors	Dependent Variables		
	Conflict	Performance	Abuse
Perceived dissimilarity	.15**	-.12*	.04*
Relationship conflict		-.40*	.09
Performance			-.11**
Conflict $\times$ performance			-.17*
Equation R^2	.17**	.15**	.37**

^a $n = 177$. Tabled values are unstandardized regression coefficients. All parameter estimates were tested for significance using bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

tionship conflict ($b = .15$, $p < .01$), negatively predicted subordinate performance ($b = -.12$, $p < .05$), and positively predicted abusive supervision ($b = .04$, $p < .05$); relationship conflict negatively predicted subordinate performance ($b = -.40$, $p < .01$) and was unrelated to abusive supervision ($b = .09$, n.s.); and subordinate performance negatively predicted abusive supervision ($b = -.11$, $p < .01$). Table 2 also shows that the relationship conflict by subordinate performance cross-product was related to abusive supervision ($b = -.17$, $p < .01$).

We used the information from these equations to calculate the mediated effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision through relationship conflict (Hypothesis 1), subordinate performance (Hypothesis 2), relationship conflict and subordinate performance (Hypothesis 3), and relationship conflict at higher and lower levels of subordinate performance (Hypothesis 4). Table 3 presents the estimates associated with each hypothesis.

The first row of results in Table 3 shows that the mediated effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision through relationship conflict was not significant ($\rho = .01$, n.s.). Hence, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. The next row of results shows that subordinate performance mediated the relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision ($\rho = .01$, $p < .01$). Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported. The next row in Table 3 shows that Hypothesis 3 was supported; the mediated effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision through relationship conflict and subordinate performance was significant ($\rho = .01$, $p < .05$).

The last two rows in Table 3 show the mediated effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision through relationship conflict at

TABLE 3
Indirect Effects of Perceived Deep-Level Dissimilarity on Abusive Supervision^a

Mediator(s)	ρ	Hypothesis
<i>Tests of hypothesized mediated effects</i>		
Relationship conflict	.01	1
Subordinate performance	.01**	2
Relationship conflict & subordinate performance	.01*	3
<i>Test of hypothesized moderated indirect effect</i>		
Relationship conflict		4
Low subordinate performance	.04**	
High subordinate performance	-.01	

^a ρ refers to the mediated effect. All estimates were tested for significance using bias-corrected confidence intervals from 10,000 bootstrapped samples.

* $p < .05$

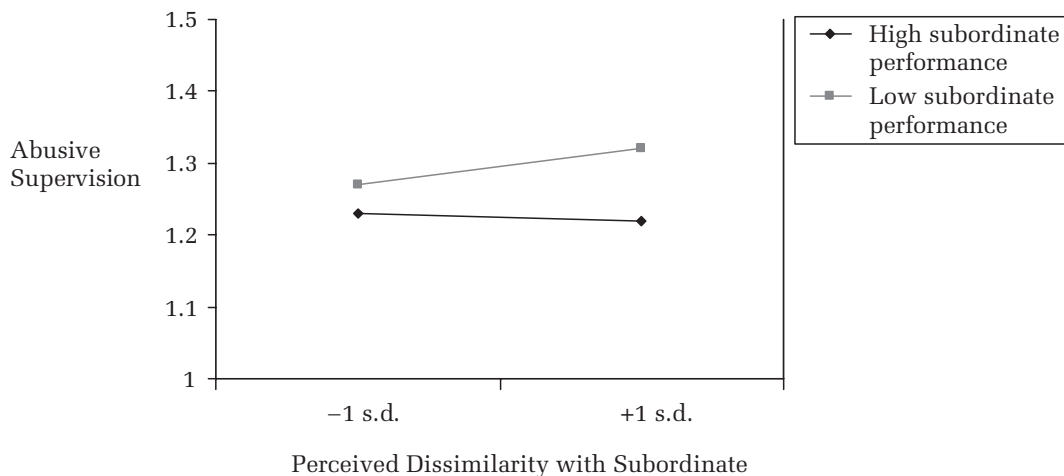
** $p < .01$

high and low levels of subordinate performance. When subordinate performance was high, the mediated effect of relationship conflict was not significant ($\rho = -.01$, n.s.); however, when subordinate performance was low, relationship conflict mediated the effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision ($\rho = .04$, $p < .01$). Figure 2 shows the plot of the mediated effects at higher and lower levels of subordinate performance (Aiken & West, 1991). The form of the interaction is consistent with Hypothesis 4; the mediated effect of relationship conflict was stronger when subordinate performance was perceived to be lower.

DISCUSSION

Our research contributes to a growing body of research exploring abusive supervision in work organizations. The research to date has shed light on the deleterious consequences of abusive supervision, but little is known about the factors that predict when abusive supervision is likely to occur. The few studies that have examined the antecedents of abusive supervision have focused on the treatment supervisors receive and suggest that supervisor perceptions of organizational injustice and contract breach are associated with subordinate reports of supervisory abuse (Aryee et al., 2007; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Tepper et al., 2006). Our research shifts the focus from the mistreatment supervisors experience to concepts described in Opatow's (1990a, 1995) work on moral exclusion. This approach provides a basic framework for answering

FIGURE 2
Mediated Effect of Perceived Deep-Level Dissimilarity with Subordinate on Abusive Supervision (through Relationship Conflict) at High and Low Levels of Subordinate Performance



the question, Why do supervisors abuse specific subordinates?

Implications for Theory and Research

Our findings suggest a causal framework in which perceived deep-level dissimilarity evokes perceived relationship conflict, which produces lower evaluations of subordinate performance, which, in turn, lead to higher levels of abusive supervision. Our findings also suggest that relationship conflict mediates the effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision, but only when supervisors perceive subordinates as having low performance. The links between subordinate performance evaluations and abusive supervision and between perceived relationship conflict and abusive supervision (when subordinate performance is low) are consistent with moral exclusion theory. From a moral exclusion perspective, perceived relationship conflict and low subordinate performance put referent subordinates beyond a focal supervisor's scope of justice, which translates into an exclusionary practice: abusive supervision.

However, although the predictors of abusive supervision we examined were restricted to analogs for the key constructs that moral exclusion theory specifies (i.e., dissimilarity, conflict, and utility), our model and arguments augment extant moral exclusion research in two general ways. First, drawing on contributions to the literature on diversity in supervisor-subordinate relationships, we proposed that perceived deep-level dissimilarity is related to abusive supervision indirectly, through its effects on supervisor perceptions of relationship conflict and supervisor perceptions of subordinate

performance. Second, the relationships between relationship conflict and abusive supervision and between subordinate performance and abusive supervision, although consistent with a moral exclusion argument, are also consistent with other contributions to the management and psychology literatures. The interpersonal conflict literature suggests that people develop negative affect toward adversaries, which translates into hostility. The victim precipitation literature supports the link between subordinate performance and abusive supervision. Subordinates who are perceived to be lower performers may become targets of abusive supervision because they fit the provocative victim profile—annoying, aggravating, and difficult to work with (Olweus, 1978).

Two features of our results may be regarded as unexpected and have implications for theory and research. First, we found that even after we accounted for the effects of supervisor perceptions of relationship conflict and subordinate performance, and their interaction, supervisor perceptions of deep-level dissimilarity remained a significant predictor of abusive supervision (see Table 2). Hence, perceived deep-level dissimilarity had both direct and indirect effects on abusive supervision. This finding is consistent with moral exclusion theory and suggests the need for additional research that examines other possible mediating mechanisms, including scope of justice. We return to this in our summary of the study's limitations.

The second unexpected finding was that Hypothesis 1 was not supported; relationship conflict did not mediate the relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and abusive supervision. Of course, the results of subsequent analyses ex-

plain why this may have occurred. The test of Hypothesis 3 suggested that relationship conflict was a distal mediator of the effect of perceived deep-level dissimilarity on abusive supervision, which operated through supervisor evaluations of subordinate performance. The test of Hypothesis 4 suggested that relationship conflict played a mediating role, albeit when subordinates were perceived to be lower performers. It appears, then, that models linking perceived relationship conflict and abusive supervision should account for supervisor perceptions of subordinate performance.

A final and more general implication of our work is that it demonstrates the usefulness of using concepts from the moral exclusion literature to explain one of the many forms of antisocial work behavior that researchers have explored. Similar models could be developed to explore other manifestations of antisocial work behavior, such as rank-and-file employees' acts of workplace deviance directed against their organization, supervisor, and coworkers—counternormative actions that threaten organizations and their members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). In extant work, researchers have invoked theories of justice, social learning, and personality to explain employees' deviance (e.g., Aquino, Douglas, & Martinko, 2004; Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999). We take the position that value may exist in modeling the occurrence of workplace deviance by exploring the factors that put the targets of deviant behavior beyond a focal individual's scope of justice. It should be noted that the scope of justice concept is not reserved to human targets; the framework can be used to explore focal persons' attitudes toward any referent that can become the target of maltreatment (e.g., an environment [Clayton & Opatow, 2003]). Hence, researchers should be able to use moral exclusion concepts to model employees' deviance directed against their organization.

Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Our study has limitations that should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. First, the nature of our research design requires caution in the conclusions we draw from the results. Although we collected the data in two waves and from two sources, we failed to measure all variables at both time points; we therefore cannot rule out the possibility that abusive supervision caused perceived dissimilarity, relationship conflict, and subordinate performance. In addition, we cannot examine the effects of perceived dissimilarity, relationship conflict, and subordinate perfor-

mance on changes in abusive supervision. It is therefore appropriate to conclude that our study results are merely *suggestive* of the causal ordering our model implies. A natural follow-up to the research we have reported here is to examine similar predictions using designs in which all variables are measured several times.

Such designs would also address a second limitation: that we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the results can be attributed to common method bias. This is particularly true for the relationship between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and relationship conflict, the measures of which were both included in the supervisor time 1 survey. However, it is fair to conclude that common method bias is an unlikely explanation for our mediation results, given that all the analyses relied to some degree on data collected at different time points and/or from different sources (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Hence, for example, the test of Hypothesis 3 was based on the product of the links between perceived deep-level dissimilarity and relationship conflict (which could have been influenced by common method bias), relationship conflict and subordinate performance (which were measured at two time points), and subordinate performance and abusive supervision (which were measured from two perspectives).

A third limitation is that all data were collected from health care employees, so we must cautiously render conclusions regarding the generalizability of the results to organizations outside the health care delivery sector. It has been argued that abusive supervision is particularly common in health care, where the costs of failure are high, yet workers face heavy workloads and time pressures (Richman, Flaherty, & Rospenda, 1996; Richman, Flaherty, Rospenda, & Christensen, 1992). A promising direction for future research is to conduct cross-industry comparisons to determine whether the results that emerged here generalize to industries not sharing these features.

A fourth limitation is that although we investigated the viability of a number of control variables, we were unable to control for all variables that may be related to abusive supervision. For example, we did not control for the tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner, nor did we account for supervisors' justice perceptions and trait hostility, although previous research has linked both with abusive supervision (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Our framework may be viewed as a middle-range theory (Moore, Johns, & Pinder, 1980), one that does not account for all possible influences but instead models how one set of factors predict abusive supervision. An important next step would be to simul-

taneously investigate the relative predictive power of models that depict abusive supervision as the result of mistreatment perpetrated against supervisors and models rooted in the notion that abusive supervisors are themselves perpetrators of mistreatment.

A fifth limitation has to do with our measure of deep-level dissimilarity. We used a general measure drawn from previous studies of perceived deep-level dissimilarity in supervisor-subordinate relationships (Liden et al., 1993; Turban & Jones, 1988). The items comprising this scale capture deep-level dissimilarity that is relevant to supervisor-subordinate relationships but, as Harrison et al. (1998) pointed out, deep dissimilarity can manifest along a number of work-related values, attitudes, and personality traits. Our use of a general measure seemed appropriate for our research objective of initially examining the role that perceived deep-level dissimilarity plays in explaining abusive supervision. In future work, it would be fruitful to take a finer-grained approach by exploring the direct, indirect, and moderated effects of specific deep-level differences on abusive supervision.

A final limitation is that we failed to measure moral exclusion, which constitutes the proximal link in a moral exclusion explanation for abusive supervision. Instead, we interpreted reports of an exclusionary practice (i.e., abusive supervision) as evidence that subordinate targets had been morally excluded from supervisors' scope of justice. Our approach is consistent with extant published research on moral exclusion, which has yet to operationalize moral exclusion directly (Hafer & Olson, 2003). As we said above, several links we tested are consistent with ideas forwarded in other theories (e.g., the relationship between supervisor perceptions of subordinate performance and abusive supervision is consistent with victim precipitation theory), but a logical direction for future research is to measure and model the cognitive rationales that are associated with moral exclusion to determine to what extent moral exclusion explains the effects observed here.

A promising foundation for such work is Bandura and colleagues' theory and research on moral disengagement, which addresses how people deactivate the self-regulatory mechanisms that ordinarily inhibit them from performing antisocial acts (Bandura, 1990, 1999; Bandura, Barbanelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). The mechanisms of moral disengagement Bandura (1999) has identified include such mental constructions as construing harm as serving a righteous purpose, and dehumanizing victims. Future research should explore the possibility that these mechanisms explain the ef-

fects of the predictors studied here as well as the effects of other potential exogenous influences on abusive supervision, such as personality and developmental problems (Evans, 1996; Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Such research would also permit examination of an emerging debate in the literature as to whether these cognitive justifications for mistreatment are the causes, the consequences, or the causes and consequences of such behavior (Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Opatow (1990a, 1995) is clear in positioning moral exclusion as an antecedent of exclusionary practices, but conceivably moral exclusion captures perpetrators' post hoc explanations for their mistreatment of referent others ("If I abuse my subordinates, I must think that they deserve unfair treatment").

Practical Implications

As workforce composition becomes increasingly diverse, supervisors will more frequently have direct reports whose values and attitudes differ from their own (Mohammed & Angell, 2004). Our research suggests that the resulting perceived deep-level dissimilarity may be directly and indirectly related to abusive supervision. A more sanguine implication of our research is that it may be possible to reduce the occurrence of abusive supervision by refraining from hiring individuals for managerial positions who are dispositionally inclined to have a narrow scope of justice and to execute hostile acts. A relevant individual difference is trait empathy, the dispositional tendency to take the perspective of others and to recognize and experience concern for others' thoughts and feelings (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). A recent study suggests that low-empathy workers were more likely to perceive that others deserve harmful treatment (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008), and a large body of empirical work suggests that low-empathy individuals are more hostile than those who are higher in trait empathy (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). By selecting personnel for trait empathy, organizations may be able to reduce the pool of managers who are inclined to put subordinates beyond the scope of justice and to abuse them.

Of course, it may not always be possible to use trait empathy as a selection tool. In such cases, organizations should discourage supervisors from perceiving that subordinates fall outside their scope of justice and should promote skills for working constructively with morally excluded subordinates. Organizations should broaden supervisors' scope of justice by endorsing concepts of pluralism—the notion that there is value in promoting tolerance and appreciation for divergent values

(Opatow, 1990b). Many organizations have found that simply increasing employee diversity does not by itself facilitate inclusion; rather, successful interventions focus on discovering similarities, developing empathy, and identifying ways of capitalizing on differences (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008). In keeping with these ideas, Homan et al. (2007) found that through training, individuals can be encouraged to adopt prodiversity beliefs, and that this, in turn, leads to healthier interpersonal processes and superior performance.

Even when organizations embrace pluralism, situations in which supervisors exclude some subordinates from their scope of justice may occur. In anticipation of these circumstances, organizations can use justice training to help supervisors interact constructively with all subordinates, particularly those whom the supervisors perceive to be dissimilar, those with whom they have relationship conflict, and those they perceive to be lower performers. Justice training involves coaching supervisors to use techniques that reduce psychological distance with employees, promote the perception that employees have "voice," and equitably apply decision-making criteria (Greenberg, 2006; Skarlicki & Latham, 2005). For example, an organization may set the goal of supervisors meeting with each direct report, one-on-one, at least monthly. Employees would be invited to use that time to provide feedback and voice concerns. In essence, supervisors would be trained in techniques to recognize and suspend bias so that they can overcome the tendency to abuse subordinates who fall beyond their scope of justice.

Conclusion

Despite its low base rate, abusive supervision is a costly workplace phenomenon in terms of lost productivity, absenteeism, turnover, and health care expenditures. It is therefore important that researchers continue to investigate the antecedent conditions associated with abusive supervision. Our findings are significant because they draw attention to previously unexamined antecedents of abusive supervision and provide the bases for practical interventions that have the potential to curb the frequency of abusive supervision.

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APPENDIX

Estimation of Regression Equations for Hypothesis Tests

The first equation estimates the direct effect of perceived dissimilarity on relationship conflict:

$$M = a_0 + a_1X + e_M, \quad (1)$$

where M is relationship conflict and X is perceived dissimilarity.

The second equation estimates the direct effects of perceived dissimilarity (X) and relationship conflict (M) on subordinates' performance (Z):

$$Z = b_0 + b_1X + b_2M + e_Z. \quad (2)$$

The third equation estimates the direct effects of perceived dissimilarity (X), relationship conflict (M), and subordinates' performance (Z), as well as the interaction between relationship conflict and subordinate performance (MZ), on abusive supervision (Y).

$$Y = c_0 + c_1X + c_2M + c_3Z + c_4MZ + e_Y. \quad (3)$$

Substituting Equation 1 for M in Equations 2 and 3 and substituting Equation 2 for Z for in Equation 3 produces Equation 4:

$$Y = c_0 + c_1X + c_2(a_0 + a_1X + e_M) + c_3(b_0 + b_1X + b_2[a_0 + a_1X + e_M] + e_Z) + c_4(a_0 + a_1X + e_M)Z + e_Y. \quad (4)$$

Rearranging the terms in Equation 4 produces the following reduced-form equation:

$$Y = c_0 + c_2a_0 + c_3b_0 + c_3b_2a_0 + c_4a_0Z + X(c_1 + c_2a_1 + c_3b_1 + c_3b_2a_1 + c_4a_1Z) + c_2e_M + c_3b_2e_M + c_3e_Z + c_4e_M + e_Y. \quad (5)$$

Equation 5 shows that the effect of perceived dissimilarity (X) on abusive supervision (Y) consists of a direct effect (c_1), an indirect effect through relationship conflict (c_2a_1), an indirect effect through subordinates' performance (c_3b_1), an indirect effect through relationship conflict and subordinate performance ($c_3b_2a_1$), and an indirect effect through relationship conflict that is moderated by subordinate performance (c_4a_1Z). The examination of the four indirect effects in Equation 5 corresponds with the tests of Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.



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