

**ABUSIVE SUPERVISION: SUBORDINATE VERSUS CO-WORKER
PERCEPTIONS**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree

MAGISTER COMMERCII

(Industrial Psychology)

in the

FACULTY OF ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

at the

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

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PRETORIA

MARCH, 2017

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Gillian Turner (student number: 10038869), declare that, “*Abusive supervision: Subordinate versus co-worker perceptions*” is my own, unaided work in both content and execution. All resources consulted and applied in this study are cited and referred to in the reference list by means of a comprehensive referencing system. Apart from the guidance and advice received from my supervisor, I have received no assistance in completing this study, except as stated in the acknowledgements.

I declare that the content of this mini-dissertation has never been used before for any qualification at any tertiary institution.

Gillian Turner



Signature

Date: 10 March 2017

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to:

- Prof Jenny Hoobler for her unselfish contribution and motivation during the course of this project. She conveyed a spirit of adventure regarding research and an excitement about teaching. Without her guidance and help, this accomplishment would not have been possible. It is a great honour to work under her supervision.
- My family, Martin, Yvonne and Delia, for providing me with unfailing support and continuous encouragement throughout my years of study and through the process of researching and writing this mini-dissertation.

Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

Research purpose: The purpose of the study is to investigate the extent to which supervisors are universally perceived as abusive across those they supervise. I propose social learning theory and social information processing theory as theoretical bases for understanding collective impression formation among subordinates reporting to the same supervisor. The study, therefore builds on a growing body of abusive supervision literature by analysing intraclass correlations between subordinates' and their co-workers' perceptions of the same supervisor.

Research motivation: Studies that examine whether or not subordinates of the same supervisor have similar perceptions of abuse are in short supply. Therefore, this study examines the possibility of objective impression formation with regards to abusive supervision so as to answer the question: Do subordinates and their co-workers mutually perceive the extent to which a supervisor's behaviour is abusive?

Research design, approach and method: This study follows a cross-sectional approach to investigate the extent to which subordinates of the same workgroup mutually perceive their supervisor's behaviour as abusive. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit full-time employed Master's of Business Administration (MBA) students from six respected universities in the United States (US). Purposive sampling was further aided by snowball sampling where each subordinate was asked to get two of their own co-workers involved in the study. A total of 1,029 surveys were distributed

and 693 completed surveys were returned. The final sample consisted of 210 sets of surveys where responses were received from the focal subordinate and two of his or her co-workers. An intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) analysis was conducted to determine the strength of intra-group agreement regarding abusive supervision perceptions.

Main findings: The results indicate that there is agreement between subordinates' and their co-workers' perceptions of abusive supervision as no significant differences were found between these two groups' assessments of the same supervisor's behaviour. The null hypothesis was accepted. A non-hypothesized finding is that dyadic tenure appears to influence the extent to which supervisory abuse is observed. That is, subordinates and their co-workers may view the same supervisor in the same light, the longer the duration of the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

Limitations: The results should be interpreted, bearing in mind that there is limited literature available on abusive supervision at the group level. Furthermore, the results should be considered with caution as the perceptions of abusive supervision were only examined at one point in time, the use of snowball sampling method may be associated with the possibility of sampling bias, and that dyadic tenure was measured with a categorical response (i.e., not treated as a continuous variable). Finally, the results may not be generalisable to the South African context.

Future research: It is suggested that future studies should investigate abusive supervision as a group-level phenomenon as few such studies currently exist. Additionally, future studies should examine the extent to which social learning and social information processing approaches contribute to the establishment of mutual perceptions about supervisory abuse. Researchers may also investigate the occurrence of abusive supervision at the group level through the lens of an alternative theoretical framework such as social identity theory.

Keywords: *abusive supervision, group level, social learning, social information processing.*

ABUSIVE SUPERVISION: SUBORDINATE VERSUS CO-WORKER PERCEPTIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Many years of leadership research focused primarily on the positive side of leadership. The focus has recently expanded to the destructive consequences of dysfunctional, that is, negative leadership in organisations. More specifically, increased attention is being paid to the subject matter of abusive supervision. Tepper (2000, p. 178) describes abusive supervision as “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact”. It is considered to be a continuous occurrence, pending behavioural changes or termination of the supervisor-subordinate relationship. Current research brands abuse as an individual-level phenomenon and demonstrates the relationship between abusive supervision and adverse employee outcomes, such as poor work performance (Ashforth, 1997), psychological distress (Tepper, 2007), job frustration (Harris, Harvey, Harris, & Cast, 2013), family-directed aggression (Hoobler & Brass, 2006), and problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006).

In order to better understand abusive supervision, it is necessary to consider Tepper's (2007) theoretical idea that abusive supervision is a form of displaced aggression. To

be exact, supervisors who feel they were treated unfairly by their organisations have a tendency to act more abusively toward their subordinates (Lui, Liao, & Loi, 2012). Hostility is typically directed against “innocent” subordinates because retaliation against the supervisor’s own source of frustration, that is, their organisation is impossible or will lead to negative consequences for the supervisor (Neves, 2014). In the same way, when supervisors recognise their immediate superior’s behaviour as abusive, they too are inclined to displace their aggression and engage in similar behaviour toward subordinates. The targets of supervisors’ aggression may share certain characteristics which foster the development of abusive supervision. For example, employees with low self-esteem and low confidence may appear unconsciously open to abuse, making them more vulnerable to exploitation (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004). In accordance, subordinates who exhibit a negative self-image and lack peer support may become the perfect targets of abusive supervision.

Due to the subjective nature of abusive supervision, it is easy to assume that two subordinates could vary in their appraisals of the same supervisor’s actions (Tepper, 2000) and observe the same supervisor behaviours differently. Specifically, one subordinate may view the supervisor as abusive, but the other does not. However, employees who are eye witnesses to the psychological abuse of their co-workers may be vicariously affected and, in turn, this observation can stimulate mutual, shared perceptions of abusive supervision. The latter idea is supported by research conducted by Priesemuth, Schminke, Ambrose, and Folger (2014). They extended the

domain of abusive supervision from individual-level perceptions to the group level, by revealing that abusive supervision can become entrenched in workgroups, in that way affecting the group as a whole. From a theory perspective, employees tend to engage in sense-making processes, based on social learning theory, when faced with undesirable workplace behaviours, thereby laying the foundation for shared perceptions about which supervisors may be abusive and which may not (Priesemuth et al., 2014).

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the growing body of abusive supervision research, there remain many questions that need to be answered. Specifically, studies that examine whether or not subordinates of the same supervisor have similar perceptions of abuse are in short supply. Present research on abusive supervision places emphasis on the individual level, thereby focusing on an individual subordinate's perspective, how it influences that subordinate's behaviour and attitudes, and negative consequences for that individual. This is consistent with Tepper's (2000) theoretical notion that abusive supervision is an idiosyncratic assessment whereby employees may perceive the same supervisor behaviours differently. This view was expanded by Martinko, Harvey, Sikora and Douglas (2011) who propose that abusive supervision may be an outcome attributable to both the subordinate's independent perception and the supervisor's engagement in overt abusive behaviours. On the other hand, empirical research has

demonstrated that abusive supervision can function at the group level, and this group level effect predicts individual problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006). This points toward the possibility that abusive supervision has an observable component that could be universally perceived by subordinates working under the same supervisor (Ogunfowora, 2013). Nevertheless, there is limited progress in understanding whether abusive supervision consists of individual or shared perceptions. In sum, this question remains unanswered: Do subordinates and their coworkers mutually perceive the extent to which a supervisor's behaviour is abusive?

1.3 PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of the study is to address the aforementioned shortcomings in the abusive supervision literature by investigating the extent to which supervisors are universally, that is, across subordinates, perceived as abusive by those they supervise. The present study builds on a growing body of abusive supervision literature by analysing interclass correlations between subordinates' and their coworkers' perceptions of the same supervisor.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study is guided by the following research objective: To determine whether perceptions of abusive supervisory behaviour differ among subordinates and their co-

workers who work for the same supervisor. As noted in the problem statement, despite Tepper's (2000) original conception of this construct as an individual-level phenomenon, later researchers have found evidence that subordinates of the same supervisor may be parallel in their assessments of abusive supervision. Therefore, the study tests these competing hypotheses:

H₀: There will be no significant differences in the levels of abusive supervision reported by a subordinate and levels of abusive supervision reported by that subordinate's co-workers who report to the same supervisor.

H₁: There will be significant differences in the levels of abusive supervision reported by a subordinate and levels of abusive supervision reported by that subordinate's co-workers who report to the same supervisor.

1.5 ACADEMIC VALUE AND INTENDED CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

Extant research on abusive supervision leaves much room for exploration. This study builds on a psychological theoretical foundation to stimulate further thinking about abusive supervision at the group level.

Bandura (1978) introduced social learning theory (SLT) which postulates learning as a cognitive process that occurs in a social context through observation or instruction. He argues that, through vicarious learning, people can indirectly learn and incorporate

specific acts of aggression in their behaviour. Furthermore, social information processing theory (SIP) stems from the proposition that individuals easily adapt their attitudes, conduct, and opinions in relation to their social context (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). SIP indicates that people are capable of learning behaviour by studying the environment in which specific behaviours occur. The idea of subjective perception will be used to delve into the possibility of objective impression formation of abusive supervisors. It is, therefore, necessary to determine if employees who report to the same supervisor come to share comparable observations and judgments regarding their supervisor's behaviour.

In addition to the abovementioned contribution, the study may arouse interest in future social science research to examine the role of intragroup dynamics such as groupthink and polarisation in the establishment of a collective social perception regarding abusive supervision. It is clear that subordinates who feel that they are emotionally mistreated by their supervisors tend to engage in self- and organisationally-destructive behaviours which ultimately affect the organisation's performance. If this perception is adopted at the group-level, the consequences of abusive supervision may spread throughout the organisation.

1.6 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

The relevant terms used in this study are provided in Table 1. They include: abusive supervision, emotional/psychological abuse, hostile work climate, and collective perception. It should be noted that these definitions are specific to the context of abusive supervision.

Table 1: Definitions of key terms

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Abusive supervision | “A sustained form of nonphysical mistreatment perpetrated by managers against their subordinates” (Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008, p. 721). |
| Emotional/psychological abuse | “Verbal belittling and humiliation, rejection and failure to provide emotional support” (Louw & Louw, 2007, p.364). |
| Abusive supervision climate | “An affective construct that occurs at the group level of analysis when employees feel envious, untrusting, and aggressive toward other organizational members” (Mawritz, Dust, & Resick, 2014, p. 378). |
| Collective perception | “A mind-set shared by group members that results from a perceived intentional harm with severe consequences” (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009, p. 229). |

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

It is clear that abusive supervision as a behavioural construct has a negative impact on individual employee outcomes such as wellbeing (Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013), job performance (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011), and organisational citizenship behaviour

(Rafferty & Restubog, 2011). Tepper (2000) argues that abusive supervision is unlikely to be perceived in the same way by subordinates working under the same supervisor as the supervisor-subordinate relationship is considered to be unique to each and every relationship dyad. In other words, some subordinates may perceive their supervisors as more abusive than do other coworkers, even when that supervisor is engaging in the same behaviour. Supporting this, leader-member exchange (LMX) theory postulates that an exchange relationship develops between each subordinate and his or her supervisor which ultimately has an influence on the subordinate's decision-making processes. This theory is useful for conceptualising habitual social altercations between a supervisor and subordinate as it explains the development of a dyadic relationship (Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012). The latter can be understood as two persons who have to function together to make the relationship work. If one person fails to cooperate, the relationship falls apart. Within the context of abusive supervision, an abusive supervisor is likely to elicit poor social exchanges with a subordinate. If the subordinate feels exploited, he or she will try to find a way around the supervisor's abusive behaviour by offering unfavourable returns. In sum, this negative relationship and exchange operates at the individual, that is, dyadic level.

2.1.1 The link between abusive supervision and emotional abuse

One can assume that this individual-level focus stems from the ties between abusive supervision and emotional abuse, since both constructs are operationalised as individuals' personal feelings of being victimised.

Emotional abuse is central to the context of abusive supervision as both play an important role in determining the degree to which psychological mistreatment affects an individual's work life. Glaser (2002) argues that in many cases emotional abuse is not accompanied by the intent to harm someone, even though the interaction between parties can be destructive. Hostile attribution bias refers to a retributive state of mind where someone in an influential position tends to project blame onto others (Adams & John, 1997). There is an elusive and semantic predicament between the desire to safeguard subordinates from harm, and a reluctance to label supervisors as abusive. For example, a supervisor may be emotionally abusive but have the purpose of bringing about better performance ratings or making a statement that mishaps are not tolerated. This kind of behaviour falls well within the domain of abusive supervision yet it may not have been the supervisor's intent to cause harm to subordinates (Tepper, 2007). Nevertheless, this leads to the under-recognition of both constructs. Keashly (2001) maintains that less attention is paid to psychological abuse in the workplace when compared to its physical counterparts, despite the notion that emotional abuse is likely to be committed by people who have ongoing relationships (e.g., supervisors, subordinates, and co-workers).

In the same way, victims of both emotional abuse and abusive supervision endure dysfunctional feelings such as depression, emotional fatigue, and anxiety (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). This may be attributable to the universal features of emotional abuse which can also be seen as

abusive supervision's foundation. These characteristics are summarised by Keashly (2008; 2001) as adapted from various authors' definitions of emotional abuse. They include:

- The establishment of a pattern over a certain timeframe;
- Unsought behaviour on the part of the target in facilitating the abusive action of the perpetrator;
- Standard treatment norms are violated with the intention of controlling others;
- Psychological harm; and
- Differences in power levels.

As maintained by Tepper et al. (2009), the presence of abusive supervision is associated with subordinates' psychological distress. As such, supervisors who exercise power with enmity may contribute to subordinates' subjective understandings of stress and apprehension. As an aside, why are subordinates so eager to remain in a professional relationship in which they experience negative treatment? They are driven by a powerful incentive-retaining employment situation (Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001). In sum, based on the acknowledged contributions of (1) Tepper's early theorising about the construct, (2) LMX theory, and (3) related emotional abuse literature, perceptions of abusive supervision are individual rather than group-level phenomena.

H₁: There will be significant differences in the levels of abusive supervision reported by a subordinate and levels of abusive supervision reported by that subordinate's co-workers who report to the same supervisor.

2.2 ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AT THE GROUP LEVEL

In contrast to the above argument, empirical evidence from the climate literature demonstrates that abusive supervision may extend to the group level (Priesemuth et al., 2014). In its theoretical context, abusive supervision is investigated to explore the occurrence of collective perceptions of the same supervisor. The latter is addressed through the lens of SLT and SIP to situate abusive supervision as a group-level phenomenon.

The shift from abusive supervision at the individual to the group level means a concurrent reflection of multiple perceivers of the same supervisor which may demonstrate homogeneity/similarity among subordinates of the same work group. A shared group representation within the context of an abusive supervision climate may result in similar impression formation.

Traditionally, multi-level views of organisational leaders are derived from information-processing and representative models. For example, Hall and Lord (1995) proposed that perceptions of supervisors may be determined at the group level through information-processing techniques that are both affective and cognitive. Psychologists

have found that people use a variety of information-processing tactics to simplify perception formation of ordinary life events. In other words, a work group may foster an emotional atmosphere that influences coworkers' information gathering techniques which may result in the construction of parallel opinions about the same supervisor. In addition, other researchers such as Lord, Brown, Harvey, and Hall (2001) argue that group-level awareness of leadership and supervision depends on infinite contextual factors that are related to the perception of the supervisor and the organisational environment. When both approaches are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that abusive supervision may be examined from a comprehensive perspective which can include all three domains: affective, cognitive, and situational factors from either the supervisor's or subordinates' perspectives. This is because supervisory behaviour and the perception thereof are a function of the specific supervisor operating in a specific environment. Ashforth (1997) presented the term 'petty tyranny' which is used to describe the use of authority in a spiteful and oppressive manner. The effects of petty tyranny are typically observed in subordinate associations and span over affective, cognitive, and behavioural variables.

2.2.1 Social learning theory

SLT can be used to support the notion that abusive supervision can emerge at the group level. From this perspective, subordinates' mutual perceptions of the same supervisor's behaviour are stimulated through the psychological matching process known as 'modelling' which embraces vicarious learning, imitation, and recognition

(Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). SLT has been documented to elucidate the transfer of behaviours between supervisors and subordinates (Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012). By virtue of the supervisor's assigned role, his/her status and power affect subordinate behaviour and outcomes, both positively and negatively as subordinates are likely to view their supervisor as an exemplar that they seek to learn from. This is consistent with Bandura's (1986) belief that almost anything can be learned when people are observing others' behaviour or when they are directly exposed to it. In general, subordinates of the same supervisor have a tendency to model the supervisor's behaviour to ensure that seemingly acceptable norms are reflected in their own behaviour. As subordinates learn certain behaviours from their supervisors, they alter the way in which they perceive the work environment and interpret information.

Abusive supervision epitomises negative workplace behaviour and when subordinates are faced with it, they employ sense-making processes that bring about mutual perceptions of those actions due to direct exposure or vicarious learning (Bandura, 1978). With abusive supervision, collective perceptions thereof can be expected to surface within a workgroup (Priesemuth et al., 2014). Subordinates interact and communicate with other group members about work events and how "the boss" is treating them. These work-related events foster joint meaning and, consequently result in the establishment of collective judgment decrees about the supervisor and work setting (Ehrhart, 2004). For this reason, social learning can be used as a theory to

explain the development of an abusive supervision climate that, in turn promotes the change from subjective to collective perceptions of the supervisor's behaviour.

2.2.1.1 Social sharing of emotions

Collective perception formation can also be a result of the social sharing of emotion. Rimé, Mesquita, Boca and Philippot (1991) coined the concept of social sharing of emotion as the tendency of persons to recall and share emotional encounters with others. In line with this area of psychological research, emotional experiences are not short-lived, but rather lasting occurrences since people generally talk with others about their perceived feelings following an emotional event (Rimé et al., 1991).

As noted in the introduction, abusive supervision is subordinates' idiosyncratic perceptions of their supervisor's inimical behaviour which arouse feelings of unfair treatment and frustration (Tepper, 2007). People are inclined to talk about their feelings as they perceive them, irrespective of their culture, gender, or the type of emotion involved (Rimé, 2007). In a situation characterised by abusive supervision, group members turn to each other to engage in conversation about the experiences and to share personal interpretations thereof (Roberson, 2006). Abusive supervision can be a potentially shattering experience which may disrupt subordinates' social, emotional, and cognitive worlds (Pennebaker et al., 2001). This points toward the likelihood that subordinates and their coworkers may start sharing personal thoughts which advance classic interpersonal group dynamics due to joint assessments of experiences they had with the supervisor. Christophe and Rimé's (1997) study

confirms this argument as they claim that targets of this phenomenon mark high interest and availability to shared emotional episodes via verbal manifestations. Listening to peers' stories elicits similar emotions. The perception of abusive supervision at the individual level may be observed at the group level since the emotional component of abusive supervision exerts an influence on the felt workplace climate through social processes such as social learning (Rimé, 2007). Social sharing of emotion supports SLT as it is a form of indirect learning among a group of subordinates who answer to the same supervisor.

2.2.2 Social information processing theory

As previously noted, the development of mutual perceptions can be the result of an abusive supervision climate. SIP theory stems from the premise that people are adaptive beings, capable of adjusting their behaviour and attitudes to the social context in which they function (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). It is a widespread theoretical base that argues that employees' behaviour is shaped by the behaviours of their supervisors and circumstantial influences (Mawritz et al., 2012). Furthermore, this theory is a way of explaining why subordinates share information and stories regarding their supervisor's behaviour. The latter corresponds with social sharing of emotion since abusive supervision creates a persuasive setting for subordinates to engage in sense-making efforts as it becomes particularly significant under conditions of unreasonable treatment (Roberson, 2006). Abusive supervision presents subordinates of the same work group with the unique opportunity to turn to each other

to talk about their interpretations of specific events which ultimately leads to comparable assessments of the supervisor's demeanour. In basic terms, they develop attitudes and opinions based on the information available to them.

Applying SIP theory in the abusive supervision context is consistent with research exploring other types of leadership perceptions at the group level. As noted in Section 2.2, Hall and Lord (1995) investigated information-processing methods to understand group members' perceptions of leaders. "A careful reflection on what is known about human information processing highlights the need to consider multiple levels of analysis in order to understand how leadership perception occurs" (Hall & Lord, 1995, p. 266). The authors claim that members of a group may set an overall emotional tone that affects their processing of information about the leader. Moreover, agreement in subordinates' perceptions could occur because they have access to the same information about their supervisor. Within the abusive supervision framework, subordinates and co-workers who answer to the same supervisor recognise similar signs of the supervisor's actions and through interaction which stimulates affective reactions, these subordinates come to develop joint perceptions of abusive supervision (Roberson, 2006). As a result, shared norms and beliefs about the typical group member perception of abusive supervision start to develop. Subordinates react to these shared perceptions in similar ways which shows how the social processing of information approach is applicable. Recurring responses on the part of subordinates

may cause a convergence of subjective perceptions about the supervisor and organisation as a whole (Hardin & Higgins, 1995).

H₀: There will be no significant differences in the levels of abusive supervision reported by a subordinate and levels of abusive supervision reported by that subordinate's co-workers who report to the same supervisor.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH PARADIGM

Research paradigms capture the basic worldview and beliefs that guide an investigator's inquiry, that is, their approach to how the research is conducted and represented (Cresswell, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There are several interesting notions held by purists about the positivist research paradigm, the paradigm in which this study can be situated. First, the positivist paradigm depends on quantifiable or measurable observations that lead to statistical analysis. Second, it claims that "science involves confirmation and falsification, and that these methods and procedures are to be carried out objectively" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 15). In other words, data collection efforts usually take the form of questionnaires, experiments or surveys, which allow one to test and re-test research hypotheses in a quantifiable manner (Maree, 2010; Neuman, 2000). However, more recently, there

has been a slight shift away from positivism towards post-positivism which better represents contemporary quantitative research (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Post-positivism takes the standpoint that research elements are affected by well-developed theories and acknowledges that the researcher's background can influence what is observed (Robson, 2002). For example, science is based on specific procedures to confirm valid, accurate, and consistent observations. However, researchers may not always achieve this, as they may bring an element of bias to the way in which the research findings are understood and described. It should be noted that there is no concrete difference between positivism and post-positivism approaches, only a difference in degree, since they are for all intents and purposes the same method of inquiry. Whereas positivism takes a "pure" view of the possibility of achieving objectivity, post-positivism argues that this is most likely not possible.

Consistent with the main principles of post-positivism, the study considers abusive supervision as an external phenomenon whereby impartial and observable facts form the basis of people's perceptions. And the underlying assumption of the study is that science is automatic which means that this study's competing hypotheses can be accepted or rejected via the application of the selected sample, surveys, and related statistical analyses. So a conclusion can be reached about whether or not subordinates and co-workers make parallel assessments about their supervisor's perceived abusive conduct.

3.2 DESCRIPTION OF BROAD RESEARCH DESIGN AND INQUIRY STRATEGY

As argued, abusive supervision as a group-level occurrence has not been thoroughly researched since the existing body of literature has generally approached it from an individual perspective. The singular aim of this study is to determine whether or not supervisors and their co-workers come to jointly perceive the same supervisor's behaviour as abusive. In view of that, a quantitative research design is used to investigate the possibility of abusive supervision as a group-level construct. Quantitative research refers to the numerical investigation of a data set that permits an acceptable degree of objectivity used to describe observable phenomena in a way that can be generalised to the population being studied (Maree, 2010; Aliaga & Gunderson, 2003). This delineation highlights three important elements that the study adheres to, namely, objectivity, numerical data, and generalisability.

The use of this design is generally supported by three understandings: (1) Cresswell's (2009) argument that the definitive objective of a research design is to generate valid research findings, (2) the fact that former research publications have also adopted a quantitative approach to examine the antecedents and outcomes of abusive supervision, (*cf* Mawritz et al., 2012), and (3) the assumption that measurement practices allow one to provide the necessary connection between factual observation and the scientific expression of abusive supervision as a group-level construct.

An inquiry strategy can be understood as the specific type of methodology used to investigate a behavioural construct in response to the overall research design.

Accordingly, a non-experimental line of investigation is appropriate for the study as “it is mainly used in descriptive studies in which the units that have been selected to take part in the research are measured on all the relevant variables at a specific time” (Maree, 2010, p. 152). In other words, hypothesis testing in quantitative research is not a planned intervention and no random assignment or manipulation of research participants to groups occurs (Welman, Kruger, & Mitchell, 2005).

Taking the aforementioned into account, the overall research design of this study can be characterised by several aspects which should be considered in relation to each other (see Table 2).

Table 2: The study's classification of the overall research design

| Broad classification | Description |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Quantitative | The study evaluated objective data consisting of numbers which is typically used in an attempt to keep the research process as stable as possible (Welman et al., 2005). |
| Primary data | The data was specifically collected for the purpose of determining and exploring various research questions about abusive supervision perceptions in the workplace (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). |
| Empirical research | The study is based on a measurable phenomenon and derives knowledge from actual experience through the collection of new or primary data that was collected in order to test the competing hypotheses (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). |
| Basic research | The study expands on existing knowledge about abusive supervision and is not conducted with the |

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| | purpose of necessarily offering possible solutions to the problems associated with the construct (Saunders et al., 2007). |
| Cross-sectional research | The data was collected at one specific point in time to provide an overview of the phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2007). |

3.3 SAMPLING

Sampling in quantitative research is concerned with the process of selecting a subset of individuals from a relevant population who are representative of that population so that the research findings may be generalised back to a whole (Maree, 2010; Welman et al., 2005). According to O'Neil (2014), three important rules need to be obeyed when choosing a representative sample: (1) it should be accessible, (2) research participants should be willing to partake in the study, and (3) the participants must have relevant experience in the phenomenon of interest.

3.3.1 Sampling method

Non-probability sampling is a sampling technique which does not make use of a random selection of population elements. It is, therefore the researcher's obligation to choose the appropriate sample to study a specific phenomenon (Maree, 2010). This technique is advantageous since it allows researchers to make use of a measurement instrument and to tap into a population that may be difficult to find or access as a whole.

The original data was collected by Hoobler and Brass (2006) who made use of non-probability sampling owing to participant accessibility. Specifically, the scholars employed two harmonising sub-types of non-probability sampling, namely purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling refers to the intentional recruitment of research participants who fall within predetermined selection criteria in order to comprehensively describe a specific situation to achieve the research objectives (Welman et al., 2005). In this case, the method realised the inclusion of a sample of full-time working people who may or may not have been subjected to abusive supervision. Purposive sampling was further aided by snowball sampling which is initiated by making contact with a few persons belonging to the identified population (that is, those who formed the subordinate group in the study; see below). Each subordinate was asked to snowball further data collection, that is, to ask two of their own co-workers to participate in the study. This is because the research question required surveying an interconnected group of employees working under the same supervisor.

The abovementioned sampling methods complement this study's overall research design as they are based on the fundamental principles of empirical research.

3.3.2 The target population

The study draws from a sample that is not industry specific, thereby tapping into the general work experiences of diverse participants. The sample consists of full-time employed Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students from six public

universities in the midwestern, southern, and eastern United States (US). This sample is appropriate because the MBA students all worked under the supervision of someone and, therefore, were in an environment where they could report on the degree to which they perceived their supervisors' behaviour as abusive. The students participated on a voluntary basis and were guaranteed that their responses would be kept confidential given the sensitive nature of abusive supervision. Students were rewarded for their participation by granting them extra credit points in their marketing and/or management modules if they returned their completed surveys to the researcher. Those who wished not to participate were given alternative opportunities to get extra credit in their modules.

Common method bias arises when there is overlapping variability between measures in a sample due to the data being collected from a single source. This can be reduced when variables tested in the same equations are reported by more than one source/informant (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). In this study, MBA students were given three surveys each: one to complete themselves as the focal subordinate in the study, and two to give to two co-workers who worked for their same supervisor. A total of 1,029 surveys were distributed and 693 completed surveys were returned. After the participants were matched by a randomly-generated ID number which was stamped on each survey, 210 three-way matches were possible. That is, the final sample consisted of 210 sets of surveys where responses were received from the focal subordinate and two of his or her co-workers. This means an acceptable response

rate of 61% was realised. Table 3 summarises the demography of the sample. The average age of the respondents was 25–34 years and 41% were females. The racial breakdown indicates that the respondents were predominantly White, followed by African Americans, which is representative of the U.S. population. Respondents reported an average working relationship tenure with their bosses of one to two years.

Table 3: Demography of sample

| | Subordinate | Co-worker | Total Sample |
|--|-------------|-----------|--------------|
| Average age | 25–34 | 25–34 | 25–34 |
| Sex – female percentage | 40% | 41% | 41% |
| Race | | | |
| White | 85% | 67% | 76% |
| African American | 8% | 4% | 6% |
| Asian American/Pacific Islander | 4% | 2% | 3% |
| Latino/Latina/Hispanic | 0.5% | 1% | 1% |
| Other | 2% | 1% | 2% |
| Subordinate-supervisor tenure of relationship | | | |
| Less than 6 months | 21% | 13% | 17% |
| 6 months to 1 year | 22% | 16% | 19% |
| 1 to 2 years | 31% | 23% | 27% |
| 2 to 5 years | 21% | 16% | 19% |
| More than 5 years | 5% | 8% | 7% |

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

The application of survey research ensures standardised data collection because it is a popular tool which realises accurate comparisons between dyads (Cresswell, 2009).

The data was collected through two separate paper questionnaires to explore the

possibility of collective perceptions about abusive supervision. The MBA students completed one survey (see Addendum A) and physically distributed one more survey to two co-workers who worked for the same supervisor (see Addendum B). Attached to all surveys were postage-paid business reply return envelopes. In this way, all surveys were anonymously returned to the lead researcher at her university by U.S. mail. When surveys were received by the researcher, they were matched triadically (subordinate to co-worker 1 to co-worker 2) by the randomly-generated ID number stamped on each survey. Even though Hoobler and Brass (2006) collected the data to explore the effects of abusive supervision between subordinates, their supervisors, and the subordinates' family members, the specific data on co-workers was never used and, therefore remains an untapped source of information used for the first time in the present study.

3.4.1 Measures

This study is characterised by a cross-sectional, multi-source design since the data were collected from a subset of the identified population at one specific point in time, but from multiple respondents. This is a rigorous design which allows for potential generalisability of the research findings, although it is possible the findings may only be generalizable to the US (Welman et al., 2005) because of where the data were collected. The original survey was designed to include several variables for other studies that may be associated with abusive supervision such as social support, diversity orientation, and positive and negative affect. In this case however, only one

measure is necessary to determine the levels of abusive supervision perceived by subordinates and their co-workers, namely Tepper's (2000) measure of abusive supervision.

The MBA students and their co-workers were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceive and consider their supervisors' behaviour as abusive. Tepper (2000) created a 15-item measure with a 5-point response scale ranging from 1= "never" to 5= "frequently, if not always". Example items include "my boss ridicules me" and "my boss reminds me of my past mistakes or failures".

In order to eliminate alternative explanations for the research findings, three control variables are included in the analyses: sex, age, and dyadic tenure, for both the subordinates and co-workers. Specifically, sex was measured on a 2-point response scale (1= "male" and 2= "female"), while 5-point response scales were used to measure age (ranging from 1= "24 or under" to 5= "over 60") and dyadic tenure (ranging from 1= "less than 6 months" to 5= "more than 5 years"). However, the initial analysis revealed that the perceivers' age and sex do not have a significant impact on the extent to which subordinates perceive their supervisor's overall conduct as abusive. It should be noted that race was not considered as a control variable since 76% of the sample was White (see Table 3, p. 24), and the power to detect differences for different racial groups was quite small.

3.5 ASSESSING AND DEMONSTRATING THE QUALITY AND RIGOUR OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Rigour in quantitative research is related to conscious effort devoted to the principles of a specific research paradigm and diligence in data collection efforts. Ultimately, the study's rigour is judged against the degree to which findings are placed in the context of relevant theory and whether they add to what is already known about abusive supervision. For this reason, it is necessary to consider the methodological aspects embedded in the research design as they resemble comparable approaches used in previous abusive supervision studies (Martinko et al., 2011; Hoobler & Brass, 2006).

3.5.1 Reliability

The reliability of a measure refers to the consistency with which it measures what it intends to measure and the extent to which the specific measure yields the same results on different occasions (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2013). There are two noteworthy matters connected to measures' reliability, namely the consistency of items and the stability of the overall measurement tool over time.

Maree (2010) argues that measurement instruments should yield an acceptable standard of consistency which can be interpreted using Cronbach's Alpha. It is considered to be one of the best indicators of internal consistency which should yield a value of 0.7 or higher (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Case in point, the abusive supervision measure used in both the subordinate and co-worker surveys in this study demonstrated strong reliability. Tepper's (2000) scale used to investigate this

construct yielded an overall reliability coefficient of 0.90. The measurement scale demonstrates high internal consistency which means that the items measure the same construct or idea. In addition to internal consistency, test-retest reliability in other studies has shown the construct being measured is expected to remain constant or highly similar for respondents over time (Welman et al., 2005). Owing to the belief that abusive supervision is a subjectively perceived phenomenon, test-retest reliability is applicable since the construct is bound to be similarly perceived over different time periods. For example, Tepper, Duffy, and Shaw (2001) used Tepper's (2000) measure to determine the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinates' resistance. The authors collected data at two points in time, separated by six months. All things considered, their study demonstrates that perceptions about abusive supervision remain relatively unchanged for subordinates whose supervisor did not change, when measured over different time periods.

3.5.2 Validity

Foxcroft and Roodt (2013) argue that the validity of a measure concerns what is being measured and how well it does so. It is not a specific property of an instrument and should merely be understood as the interaction of both the measure's purpose and the sample. Validity can be conceptualised in terms of three aspects: (1) the entity/idea that one wants to measure, (2) the nature of the measurement, and (3) due consideration of the sample and how to correlate participants' responses. Table 4

shows how different types of validity inform these aspects, in conjunction with reliability. The intention is to establish an overall view of the study's validity.

Table 4: Types of validity applicable to the study

| The measurable entity (collective perceptions of abusive supervision) | |
|---|---|
| Content validity | The survey items accurately measure abusive supervision as a construct. |
| Face validity | Item content is considered to be consistent with the definition of abusive supervision. |
| Nature of the measure (quantitative survey with a numerical response scale) | |
| Construct validity | The items represent abusive supervision and truthfully measure the construct in terms of theory and experience. |
| Discriminant validity | Abusive supervision can be distinguished from other constructs such as workplace bullying and emotional abuse, even though it may have similar characteristics. |
| How to measure the phenomenon (subordinates and co-workers working for the same supervisor) | |
| Criterion validity | Correlations between subordinates' and co-workers' perceptions of abusive supervision may be evident. |

In his construct validation study of abusive supervision, Tepper (2000) clearly established content validity of his now commonly-used abusive supervision scale. The present study employs Tepper's (2000) abusive supervision measurement instrument administered to two distinct sources, i.e., subordinates and their co-workers.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed using the IBM SPSS version 23 Statistics programme. The intent was for the analysis to yield an unbiased result that can be generalised to the larger population. Specifically, an Intraclass Correlation (ICC) was calculated to describe how strongly units in the same group (i.e., subordinates and their co-workers) resemble each other in their responses. This analysis requires group-structured data, and it quantifies the degree to which individuals with a degree of relatedness bear a resemblance to each other in terms of a measureable variable. The research participants must function in an exchangeable group. In this study subordinates and their co-workers are theoretically equivalent and are considered together during the analysis (DeCoster, 2012). Therefore, an ICC is an appropriate statistical analysis which can be used to measure the degree of consensus between subordinates' and their co-workers' perceptions of abusive supervision.

ICC was analysed by considering three main outputs generated in SPSS that are conclusive of an overall reliability analysis: descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, and the ICC which ranges from 0 (no agreement) to 1 (perfect agreement). The overall interpretation was judged on the following criteria (DeCoster, 2012):

- A larger ICC specifies that when subordinates have a high score on abusive supervision, their co-workers are also likely to have high scores.

- An ICC near zero shows that there is no linear relationship between the scores of subordinates and their co-workers reporting to the same supervisor.

The ICC cut-off values which are used to interpret the degree of agreement/consensus between subordinates' and their co-workers' perception of abusive supervision are based on the work of Burdock, Fleiss, and Hardesty (1963), along with Fleiss (1986). These authors recommend that ICC values lower than .4 signify 'poor agreement'; values between .4 and .75 represent 'fair to good agreement'; and values more than .75 represent 'excellent agreement'.

4. RESULTS

Table 5 (p. 32) shows the correlations, means, and standard deviations for the variables in the study. Consistent with the null hypothesis, subordinates' perception of a supervisor's abusive behaviour was positively related to the assessments made by co-worker 1 ($r = .39, p < .01$) and co-worker 2 ($r = .43, p < .01$). When subordinates reported higher levels of abusive supervision, their co-workers also indicated higher perceptions thereof (DeCoster, 2012). This relationship was also examined by including three control variables, namely age, sex, and dyadic tenure. Interestingly, age and sex were not significantly related but dyadic tenure was significantly related to the levels of abusive supervision reported by both subordinates and their co-workers

($r = .19$, $p < .01$). In basic terms, the time of subordinate-supervisor acquaintance appears to influence the extent to which abusive supervision is observed. Subordinates who have been reporting to the same supervisor for a prolonged period are more likely to witness and perceive the supervisor's conduct as abusive than those subordinates who have been recently assigned to a particular supervisor (*cf* Yagil, 2006).

Table 5: Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of study variables

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|--|-----|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|-------|----|
| 1. Subordinate abusive supervision | 1.4 | .62 | (.87) | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Co-worker 1 abusive supervision | 1.4 | .64 | .39** | (.93) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Co-worker 2 abusive supervision | 1.4 | .72 | .43** | .43** | (.79) | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Age of subordinate | 2.0 | .78 | -.05 | -.1 | -.08 | - | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Age of co-worker 1 | 2.4 | .95 | .04 | -.05 | .01 | .36** | - | | | | | | | |
| 6. Age of co-worker 2 | 2.4 | .94 | .001 | -.01 | .018 | .3** | .43** | - | | | | | | |
| 7. Sex of subordinate ¹ | 1.4 | .49 | .04 | -.01 | .01 | -.03 | -.04 | -.06 | - | | | | | |
| 8. Sex of co-worker 1 ¹ | 1.5 | .49 | -.04 | -.07 | .1 | -.06 | -.01 | -.03 | .17* | - | | | | |
| 9. Sex of co-worker 2 ¹ | 1.5 | .51 | .09 | .04 | .04 | .1 | .04 | -.01 | .2* | .21** | - | | | |
| 10. Subordinate tenure with supervisor | 2.6 | 1.1 | .19** | .01 | .131 | .26** | .16* | .137 | -.03 | .02 | -.04 | - | | |
| 11. Co-worker 1 tenure with supervisor | 2.8 | 1.2 | .24** | .15 | .06 | .11 | .32 | .23** | .43 | .1 | .32 | .18* | - | |
| 12. Co-worker 2 tenure with supervisor | 2.8 | 1.2 | .09 | .21** | .2* | .19* | .29** | .29** | .06 | .06 | .01 | .26** | .33** | - |

¹ Sex: 1 = male and 2 = female

Note. $n=210$.

Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients appear in parentheses along the main diagonal.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

4.1 HYPOTHESIS TESTING

After examining the correlations between study variables, an ICC analysis was conducted to assess the agreement between the subordinate group and co-worker group. Specifically, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to understand if there is consistency between subordinates' and co-workers' mean level perceptions of abusive supervision. The results indicated that between-group variance was larger than within-group variance ($F=6.27$, $p < .00$) which signifies statistically significant conformity of scores within groups.

Furthermore, I calculated ICC within-group agreement and chose ICC_2 which is a measure of inter-rater reliability (Landers, 2011; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). The ICC_2 score was .92. This value exceeds .70, the commonly considered lowest acceptable reliability value (Bliese, 2000; Burdock et al., 1986; Fleiss, 1986). The results, therefore indicate that there is very high consensus between subordinates' and their co-workers' perceptions of abusive supervision ($ICC_2 = .92$, $p < .00$). In other words, there are no significant differences between these two groups' assessments of the same supervisor's behaviour. Taken together with the control variable findings, the conclusion is that subordinates and their co-workers may come to view the same supervisor in the same light, possibly depending on the duration of the supervisor-subordinate relationship.

5. DISCUSSION

Even though much has been learned about abusive supervision, the construct has mainly been conceptualised at the individual level and the focus continues to be on the negative impact of abusive supervision on individual organisational members. In basic terms, the abusive supervision literature speaks to individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (*cf* Harris et al., 2013 and Tepper, 2007). The purpose of this study was to address the existing paucity of abusive supervision literature which examines whether or not subordinates of the same supervisor have similar perceptions. The primary contribution of this study, therefore, lies in acknowledging the existence of objective impression formation of abusive supervisors and to lay the necessary theoretical and empirical groundwork that may advance knowledge about abusive supervision as a group-level phenomenon.

As such, this study qualifies Tepper's (2000) original conception of abusive supervision as an individual-level phenomenon, by exploring the possibility that the construct may occur at the group level. Subordinates who feel they are emotionally wronged by their supervisors are inclined to participate in destructive behaviours which may affect the entire workgroup and perhaps organisation's performance. So, the negative consequences of abusive supervision may spread throughout the organisation. Prior research minimises abusive supervision's impact on outcomes at other levels. Specifically, scholars tend to overlook the likelihood of the construct becoming embedded in workgroup climates, thereby affecting the organisation as a

whole (Priesemuth et al., 2014). An exception to the latter statement is a paper written by Mawritz et al. (2012, p. 325), who acknowledge that “hostile climate moderates the relationship between abusive supervisor behavior and work group interpersonal deviance such that the relationship is stronger when hostile climate is high”. Nevertheless, this study has found evidence that subordinates of the same supervisor may make parallel in assessments of abusive supervision. But further research is necessary to understand whether this is truly occurring at a group-level, due to group-level factors.

I propose that abusive supervision in its theoretical context can be situated at the group level by understanding it not from Tepper’s original conceptualization but instead through the lens of SLT and SIP. There is a need for integrated arguments regarding the influence of social learning and social information processing on abusive supervision, and how these approaches can foster a joint perception of the same supervisor.

As suggested by SLT, people can learn and incorporate specific acts of aggression in their behaviour through observation (Bandura, 1978). Therefore, a social learning perspective on abusive supervision advocates that supervisors influence the perceptions of subordinates via conscious and/or unconscious modelling (i.e., psychological matching processes such as observational learning, imitation, and identification). Bandura (1973, p. 44) notes that “most of the intricate responses people display are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of

example”. Furthermore, Cheng and Chartrand (2003) state that modelling processes often occur at an unconscious level whereby individuals are unaware that they are imitating the behaviour of others. Consequently, this process seems particularly important when the behavioural target is abusive conduct in organisations since supervisors lay the foundation for behavioural expectations by virtue of their assigned role and status within the organisation (Brown et al., 2005). Consistent with this claim, previous studies have shown that people are more likely to mimic the behaviour of high-status individuals (Bandura, 1973; Weiss, 1977).

Since social learning draws heavily on the concept of modelling, the premise of collective judgement decrees about the supervisor and workplace rests on the modelling incentives prompted by the supervisor. In this vein, Bandura (1973) notes that modelling is stimulated by verbal instruction and/or live demonstration (i.e., an individual who exhibits specific behaviour). Subordinates learn how to engage in seemingly acceptable workplace behaviours by observing their supervisor’s actions, thereby adjusting the way in which they perceive the workplace and interpret information (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012). Accordingly, subordinates are inclined to share information and stories regarding their supervisor’s behaviour and, eventually come to perceive the supervisor’s demeanor and work environment in a similar light (Ehrhart, 2004).

In relation to the essence of social learning, SIP postulates that individual subordinates study their immediate social environment (i.e., their workplace) which provides cues

about behaviour expectations, values, and norms (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). In basic terms, subordinates use this information gathered from the workplace to guide their behaviour and judgements. For example, subordinates may receive and interpret available information about the consequences of different hostile behaviours. For example, a heated dispute may be tolerated, while verbal abuse may be grounds for dismissal.

Given that abusive supervision presents subordinates of the same workgroup an opportunity to talk to each other about their understandings of specific events, the formation of comparable observations and judgements regarding their supervisor's conduct is to be expected. According to Glomb and Liao (2003, p. 488), "group-level influences operate on individual aggression by providing shared information about behavioural norms and expectations, exposure to aggressive role models, and homogeneous aggressive tendencies within a group". Therefore, subordinates come to develop joint perceptions of the (un)acceptability of abusive supervision largely because of social interaction and hostility which is entrenched in their work context (Glomb & Liao, 2003; Priesemuth et al., 2014). Given the proximal impact of abusive supervision on subordinates and its unfair nature, subordinates employ sense-making activities which heightens the presence of supervisory abuse. Correspondingly, SIP posits that these sense-making processes will result in shared perceptions of the supervisor's abusive conduct which validates how social processing of information approach is relevant.

Results of this study also suggested that dyadic tenure is related to abusive supervision. That is, subordinates and their co-workers may view the same supervisor in the same light, the longer the duration of the supervisor-subordinate relationship. This finding is also supported by both social learning and social information processing as theoretical platforms. According to Zapf and Gross (2001), abusive behaviour tends to develop and escalate over time which validates the assumption that abusive supervision is more likely to be witnessed over a long period. Within the theoretical framework, it becomes clear that subordinates of the same workgroup may only come to establish collective perceptions about abusive supervision after continued exposure to, and contact with the same supervisor. In support of this, a longitudinal study conducted by Measham (2013) found that it can take up to three years for individuals to develop sufficient new knowledge embedded in a group since social information processing and learning allow for an increased understanding of the problem but over time.

All things considered, reconceptualising abusive supervision at a group level is bolstered by both social learning and social information processing as these two approaches (1) reveal that a change in understanding can take place among a group of subordinates regarding the same (supervisor's abusive) behaviour, (2) argue that this change goes beyond the individual subordinate and becomes situated within the workgroup, and (3) have their effect through observational learning processes and

social interactions such as those occurring between subordinates reporting to the same supervisor (Reed et al., 2010).

5.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The study extends the growing but still very limited body of research on abusive supervision as a group-level phenomenon. Although scholarly interest in abusive supervision has increased over the years, the extant literature has mainly examined the construct 1) as an idiosyncratic assessment, and 2) in conjunction with the negative consequences it holds for the individual employee (Priesemuth et al., 2014; Tepper, 2000). Therefore, the goal of this study has been to take the abusive supervision literature in a new direction by providing scholars with a new perspective on abusive supervision--as a shared perception. Drawing on theoretical perspectives, some of which have not been previously utilised in the abusive supervision literature, this manuscript sheds light on the possibility that abusive supervision may occur at the group level. Furthermore, ad-hoc results suggest that dyadic tenure may also affect perceptions of abusive supervision. This finding is also congruent with both social learning and social information processing theory in the sense that perceptions of abusive supervision may be transferred from the individual subordinate to co-workers of the same workgroup due to modelling processes and social interaction.

In addition to the abovementioned theoretical implications, the findings have implications for practitioners. Studies have shown that hostile organisational climates have undesirable effects on both the wellbeing of employees and for the organisations concerned in terms of lost productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover of personnel (Einarsen & Gemzoe-Mikkelson, 2002; Rayner, 2000). Understanding that abusive supervision may function at the group level can provide insight into appropriate organisational interventions--for example, initiatives aimed at facilitating positive modelling processes by training supervisors to engage in constructive conflict and provide feedback which, in turn, may allow subordinates to optimistically alter the way in which they process information about their immediate work environment. It is understandable that many supervisors act hostilely toward certain subordinates, especially when their own bosses have mistreated them (Lui et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important that supervisors recognise when they have behaved abusively and seek to restore the victim's self-esteem before their co-workers also perceive mistreatment in the workgroup.

5.2 LIMITATIONS

The study has several restrictions that range from the broad view of abusive supervision to the specific focus of the study. First, abusive supervision has mainly been studied as an individual-level phenomenon which limits the availability of literature on the collective perceptions thereof. Nevertheless, the individual focus of

this construct was used as a point of departure from which to explore its potential influence at the group level. Second, the use of a snowball sampling method is commonly associated with the possibility of sampling bias (Berg, 1988). Even though the use of snowball sampling has been documented as a successful data collection technique (*cf* Grant & Mayer, 2009; Piccolo, Greenbaum, Den Hartog, & Folger, 2010), a concern is that the focal subordinate may have distributed the surveys to co-workers whom they like or who are similar to them (i.e., those co-workers who harbour similar attitudes about their supervisor), or even filled the co-worker surveys out him/herself. These possibilities cannot be entirely ruled out given the research design. In addition, the results should be considered with caution as dyadic tenure was measured with a categorical response option instead of treating it a continuous variable (i.e., asking respondents to indicate their actual dyadic tenure). Future studies should consider the use of continuous variables to measure the sample's demographics as it simplifies the statistical analysis, leads to easy interpretation and presentation of results (Altman & Royston, 2006), and does not discard valuable variance.

Finally, the results of this particular study may not be generalisable to the South African context since the sample was drawn from full-time employed MBA students from six respected universities in the US. The generalisability of a study's results depends on the representativeness of the sample. Because this study's sample is representative of the US population in terms of ethnic group (i.e., White, African American, Asian

American, and Hispanic), the results may not accurately represent abusive supervision among South African ethnic groups (i.e., Black, White, Indian, and Coloured). In addition, the way survey items are phrased and interpreted can differ between the two countries due to cultural differences.

5.3 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of the study create alternative avenues for future research on abusive supervision observed at the group level. As mentioned in Section 5.2, the sample was collected from various industries in the US and may therefore not be generalisable to South African industries. Future research should investigate abusive supervision as a group-level phenomenon within the South African context as no such studies currently exist. The country's culturally diverse society makes for a unique case to investigate the occurrence of abusive supervision as the likelihood of supervisory abuse increases when employees belong to a minority group (Archer, 1999). Proof positive, Cunniff and Mostert (2012) conducted a study in South Africa to determine the prevalence of workplace bullying between gender and race groups. The authors found that (1) men experience higher levels of indirect bullying from supervisors than women, and (2) Black employees tend to experience the highest level of workplace bullying, when compared to other ethnic groups such as Indian and Coloured employees.

Another logical extension of the study would be to investigate the extent to which social learning and social information processing approaches contribute to the establishment of mutual perceptions about abusive supervision. For example, a group of subordinates reporting to the same supervisor may make parallel assessments about the supervisor's behaviour merely because of rumour, exaggeration, or co-workers who witness vicarious abusive supervision (i.e., observational learning and the interpretation of recycled information through social interaction with co-workers). Although subordinates may feel that their perceptions of supervisory abuse are truthful, it could be that their assessments of the supervisor's conduct are distorted by rumour which becomes exaggerated with each retelling (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007), rather than group-level shared perceptions and sense-making. As such, scholars may seek to determine the actual actions that may explain how and why perceptions of supervisory abuse can be transferred from one subordinate to his or co-workers reporting to the same supervisor.

A final avenue for future research would be to investigate abusive supervision as a group level phenomenon from an alternative theoretical framework such as social identity theory which explores when and why individuals are likely to identify with certain groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity can, therefore be used to investigate the formation of shared perceptions as frequent interactions, group cohesion, and mutual support among subordinates of the same workgroup may increase their identification with other group members and, by extension their shared

perceptions of supervisory abuse (Cropanzano, Li, & Benson, 2011; Priesemuth et al., 2014). Organisational leaders need to realise that abusive supervision is a problem which needs to be better understood. This will allow us to successfully mitigate and prevent the negative impact of abusive supervision before the long-term effects become visible within workgroups and, eventually the organisation at large.

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