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Breaking the cycle of abusive supervision: How disidentification and moral identity help the trickle-down change course

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Abstract:

Studies show that abusive leader behaviors 'trickle down' to lower organizational levels, but this research ignores that many abused supervisors do not perpetuate abuse by harming their own subordinates. Drawing on social-cognitive theory and related research, we suggest abused supervisors might defy rather than emulate their managers' abusive behavior. Specifically, we predicted that some abused supervisors—namely, those with strong moral identities—might in effect 'change course' by engaging in less abuse or demonstrating ethical leadership with their subordinates to the extent they disidentify with their abusive managers. Across 2 experiments (n = 288 and 462 working adults, respectively) and a field study (n = 500 employees and their supervisors), we show that relations between manager abuse and supervisors' abusive and ethical behaviors were carried by supervisors' disidentification, and that the direct and indirect effects of manager abuse were stronger for supervisors with comparatively higher moral identity levels. We discuss our findings' implications and avenues for future research.

Keywords:

disidentification, trickle-down, abusive supervision, ethical leadership, moral identity

The presence of abusive and other destructive workplace behaviors is an important concern for organizational researchers and practicing managers, especially in light of evidence that leader behaviors can "trickle down" to affect the actions of employees at lower organizational levels (e.g., Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). Indeed, research demonstrates that the transmitted leader behaviors can be positive or negative (cf. Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012; Mayer et al., 2009). In both cases, researchers suggest individuals model their leaders' behavior via the learning processes Bandura (1986) described in his social-cognitive theory.

Although theoretical and empirical research supports the existence of a trickle-down model of aggression (Bandura, 1978; Goldstein, 1986), clearly not all abused supervisors subsequently abuse their own subordinates. Mawritz et al. (2012), for instance, found a correlation of only .36 between managers' and supervisors' abusive behavior (see also Kiewitz et al., 2012).[1] But the author of social-cognitive theory posed another question about trickle-down processes that is perhaps even more vexing: "[T]he challenging question requiring explanation is not why people who inhabit an aggression-breeding [environment] should develop aggressive modes of response, but why anyone residing in such an environment should adopt a markedly different style of life" (Bandura, 1973, p. 98).

Adopting a markedly different behavioral style means eschewing the attributes or principles that characterize the offender, reflecting what organizational scholars refer to as relational disidentification (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Without using the notion of disidentification per se, Bandura (1973) nonetheless did note that in some cases observers do not identify with models but instead actively reject them. In reporting on a similar phenomenon involving the transmission of cultural tastes, Berger and Heath (2008) described matters this way: Individuals will adopt attitudes, possessions, and behaviors to convey both who they are and who they are not, a disidentification process establishing an identity that distinguishes them from those whom they view negatively. Abused supervisors, then, might not simply refrain from abusing their subordinates, but might strive to become positive role models for them—in stark contrast to their own prior experiences. This sort of countermodeling (i.e., disidentification and the like) might seem puzzling, but researchers studying the intergenerational transmission of abuse (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Hunter & Kilstrom, 1979) have noted a paradox in that respect: The social learning processes that Bandura identified as key to modeling (e.g., attention to the model, retention of knowledge about the model's behavior) can be just as evident among nonperpetuators as among those who display the trickle-down effects of modeling—and in some instances even more so! There are certainly differences between parental abuse and abusive supervision; nevertheless, to the extent this line of research informs the trickle-down of abusive behavior in the workplace (see Game, 2008; Kiewitz et al., 2012, for a discussion of parallels between parent-child and supervisor-subordinate relationships), we found the social-cognitive explanation incomplete and disidentification to be a compelling complementary explanation worthy of investigation.

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[1] Following Mawritz et al. (2012), we use the terms "supervisor" and "manager" to refer to front-line (i.e., lower level) supervisors and their bosses, respectively. The former typically interact on a daily basis with lower-level employees and report to the latter, who hold middle- or upper-level management positions. We use the term "employee" to refer to the supervisor's subordinates; they are typically at the lowest organizational level and report to a supervisor.

The purpose of the current research, therefore, is to understand why individuals might not perpetuate the cycle of abusive supervision—the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors toward subordinates (Tepper, 2000). We draw from social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) for insights regarding why supervisors who are abused by their managers might in effect “change course” by engaging in less abusive behavior or demonstrating ethical leadership (i.e., the display and promotion of normatively appropriate behavior through personal actions, communication, and reinforcement; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005) with their subordinates. By course change, we mean that the relationship between abusive manager behavior and supervisor ethical leadership is not necessarily negative, as suggested by social-cognitive theory and prior research (Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017), but that the relationship can be positive. Similarly, we suggest the positive relationship between abusive manager behavior and abusive supervision indicative of trickle-down effects (e.g., Mawritz et al., 2012) can be negative. As explained subsequently, we pinpointed moral identity as a moderator variable that theory and research suggest might establish an important boundary condition on the relationship between abusive manager behavior and supervisor disidentification, with downstream consequences for abusive and ethical behaviors.

To be sure, there is a difference between not being an abusive supervisor and being an ethical leader. Although having an ethical leader as a role model makes ethical leadership more likely (Mayer et al., 2009), supervisors need not have an ethical leader to engage in ethical leadership (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2007). We suggest that supervisors might display ethical leadership not only despite the absence of an ethical leader as role model, but even in the presence of an abusive one. We certainly do not mean to imply that the presence of abusive manager behavior is causally necessary for a supervisor to become ethical, but we do contend that abusive manager behavior can be causally sufficient for a supervisor to display ethical leadership. Thus, our research looks for evidence consistent with Bandura’s question about why (and when) people might adopt behavior that differs markedly from the modeled behaviors they observe.

Theoretical Background

Psychologists (e.g., Akers, 1977; Bandura, 1977, 1986) have long contended that behavior, including aggressive behavior, is imitated and learned from role models. Indeed, social-cognitive theory is based on the idea that people emulate the observed behavior of others, particularly those in positions of authority. Bandura (1977) proposed three necessary conditions for the modeling process to be successful: the observer must (a) pay attention to the modeled behavior, (b) retain (or remember) the behavior, and (c) be motivated to reproduce the behavior. Theory and research (Bandura, 1977, 1986) suggest social learning is more likely to occur when a role model’s actions are highly visible (thereby increasing or focusing attention); recent, emotional, or vivid (supporting memory); and reinforced (enhancing motivation).

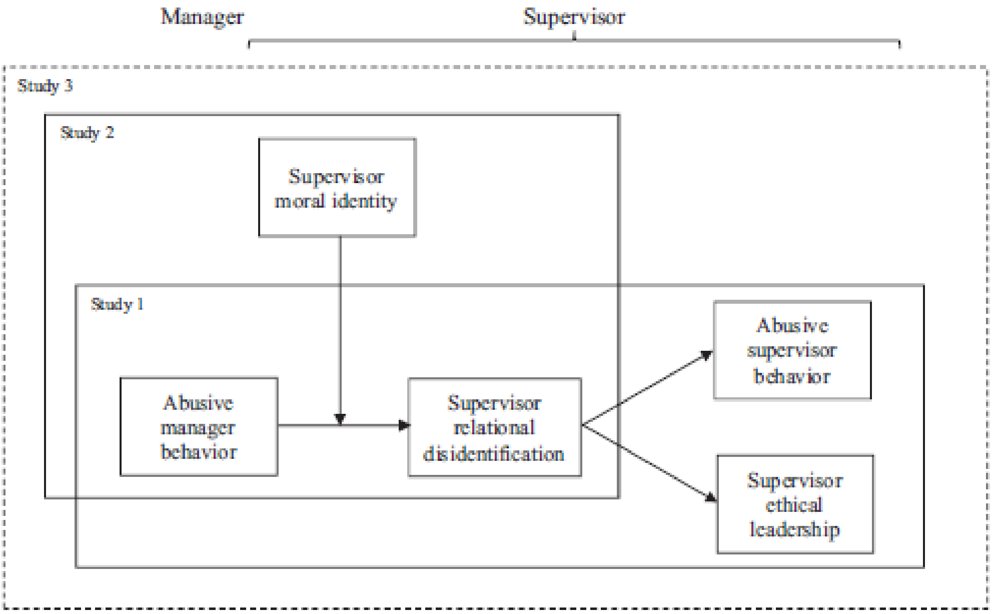
Social-cognitive theory has been cited as a primary explanation for trickle-down effects of leader behaviors in organizations, including abusive supervision. According to Bandura (1977, 1986), the behaviors of supervisors are likely to command attention from lower-level employees because supervisors interact frequently with subordinates and their hierarchical position affords them high status and power. Furthermore, the visibility, salience, and negative valence of abusive supervisory behaviors make them likely to be remembered (Bandura, 1977), as do their sustained and vivid nature (see Tepper, 2000). Moreover, individuals who experience or observe continual hostility from a supervisor might come to consider abusive behavior acceptable and appropriate, thereby motivating them to emulate such behavior in their own interactions with other organization members. Individuals are also motivated to model leaders' abusive behavior when important resources and outcomes (e.g., promotions, choice work assignments) are controlled or determined by superiors.

A few recent studies have provided evidence that abusive leader behaviors can trickle down to affect the judgment and behaviors of individuals at lower levels of the organizational hierarchy. For example, Mawritz and colleagues (2012) found that abusive manager behavior was positively related to abusive supervisor behavior, which in turn was positively related to employee interpersonal deviance. Similarly, Liu and colleagues (2012) observed that abusive supervision can trickle down from managers through supervisors to diminish employee creativity.

The Current Research

In seeking to better understand why individuals might "break the cycle" of abusive supervision across an organization's hierarchical levels, we develop hypotheses and empirically examine them across three studies, as depicted in Figure 1. We test Hypotheses 1 and 2 in Study 1, an online experiment assessing relational disidentification as a mechanism through which manager abuse is associated with supervisory ethical leadership and abusive supervision. In a second experiment (Study 2), we investigate whether supervisors' disidentification with manager abuse is contingent on their moral identity (Hypothesis 3). We then propose in Study 3 that the indirect effects of manager abuse on supervisors' ethical and abusive behavior (via disidentification) are conditional on supervisors' moral identity levels, and we test these predictions (Hypotheses 4 and 5) with a field study of 500 employees and their supervisors. In the sections that follow, we develop the rationale for our hypotheses in relation to the studies testing them.

Figure 1. A conceptual framework. The paths depicting direct effects were excluded for visual clarity.


Manager
Supervisor
Study 3
Study 2
Supervisor moral identity
Study 1
Abusive manager behavior
Supervisor relational disidentification
Abusive supervisor behavior
Supervisor ethical leadership

The current research makes two primary contributions. First, we invoke relational disidentification as one reason why supervisors who are abused by their managers might demonstrate ethical leadership (and less abusive behavior) with their subordinates. Because social-cognitive theory does not predict why (or when) an individual might engage in behaviors that diverge from those displayed by models, we combine theoretical perspectives on learning and identification processes to advance understanding of trickle-down effects. Berger and Heath (2008) likewise note that to understand the decline—as well as the spread—of behaviors like abusive supervision, researchers should address both the processes of imitation (e.g., modeling) and those of divergence (e.g., disidentification). We also advance the disidentification literature by investigating its role in shaping ethical reactions to experienced abuse (Becker & Tausch, 2014; Cameira & Ribeiro, 2014).

Second, we develop and test hypotheses implicating moral identity as an important characteristic that can attenuate or strengthen the proposed course-change effects. Identifying factors that deter supervisors from following in their managers' behaviorally abusive footsteps will clarify the nature and course of abusive behavior throughout organizations. Moreover, our results shed light on boundary conditions that qualify previous empirical results. In sum, we enhance understanding of the trickle-down phenomenon by exploring the roles of disidentification and moral identity in two laboratory experiments and a field study of subordinates and supervisors. Collectively, our studies offer evidence to suggest that abused supervisors engage in less abusive and more ethical behavior as a function of disidentification with their manager, which is more likely to result among supervisors with high moral identity. More broadly, our conceptual model (Figure 1) points toward new avenues for theoretical insights into trickle-down effects.

Study 1: The Mediating Role of Disidentification

Not Just Breaking the Cycle of Abuse, But Changing Course

Although a few studies have provided evidence of the trickle-down phenomenon in organizations, trickle-down effects rooted in social-cognitive theory are not a universal finding in extant research (e.g., see Wo, Ambrose, & Schminke, 2015). Moreover, findings from research on the intergenerational transmission of abuse reveal that adult children of abusive parents can respond in ways that suggest disidentification motivates their own parenting style (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987). In a work setting, abuse from a manager could likewise prompt supervisors to experience disidentification and subsequently display more ethical and less abusive behaviors with their subordinates. We therefore turned to organizational research on social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) to understand why such a change of course might occur.

Social identification refers to perceived oneness with or belongingness to some collective (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Individuals can also define themselves vis-à-vis role-relationships (e.g., supervisor-subordinate) in a process described as relational identification (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). When individuals include positive supervisory relationships as part of that identification process, they adhere to espoused values and norms. The result is that positive outcomes (e.g., cohesion, cooperation) tend to follow. However, Elsbach (1999; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001) proposed that one's identification need not be positive. Rather, her work expanded the concept of identification to include ambivalent, indifferent, and negative relationships. The latter reflects relational disidentification, which occurs when an individual defines him or herself as not having the same attributes or principles that characterize a relational partner (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

In the context of our trickle-down model of abuse, disidentification suggests supervisors are likely to espouse values or leadership philosophies that contrast with those of their abusive managers. Because ethical leadership involves discussing ethical issues, demonstrating normatively appropriate behavior, and reinforcing such behavior with rewards and punishments (Brown et al., 2005), it stands in stark contrast to the hostile and derisive behaviors characteristic of abusive supervision. In this way, the behaviors one would exhibit to be seen as an ethical leader are "markedly different" from those characterizing his or her abusive manager. By disassociating with the manager's abusive ways, supervisors may therefore be less likely to behave abusively toward their subordinates and more likely to display behaviors reflecting ethical ideals—for example, by being fair and honest and treating them with respect. This change of course is thought to be driven by individuals' desires to affirm their distinctiveness and to distance themselves from the manager's approach to supervision, which is incongruent with their own (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Vadera & Pratt, 2013). Indeed, in a study of families in which the cycle of abusive parenting was not transmitted across generations, Hunter and Kilstrom (1979) explicitly referred to "self-differentiation" as one of the key mechanisms involved (p. 1320). Also consistent with this idea, Ashforth and Mael (1998) noted that disidentification of this sort can prompt conscientious dissent and acts of constructive resistance.

In sum, theory and findings concerning disidentification suggest a negative relationship between manager abuse and abusive supervision, and a positive relationship between abusive manager behavior and supervisor ethical leadership. That is, the experience of relational disidentification may prompt supervisors abused by their managers to demonstrate less abusive supervision and more ethical leadership. Thus, based on the reasoning and literature described above, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Abusive manager behavior will have an indirect effect on supervisor ethical leadership through relational disidentification with the manager. More frequent experiences of abuse from a manager will be positively associated with relational disidentification, which in turn will be positively associated with supervisor ethical leadership.

Hypothesis 2: Abusive manager behavior will have an indirect effect on abusive supervision through relational disidentification with the manager. More frequent experiences of abuse from a manager will be positively associated with relational disidentification, which in turn will be negatively associated with abusive supervision.

Method

Participants and procedure

Study 1 was conducted as an online experiment with working adults recruited through an upper-level management course at a university in the southeastern United States and working adults across the United States recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board approved Studies 1 and 2 (UCF IRB number SBE-15–11213, "Breaking the Cycle of Abusive Supervision: When the Trickle-Down Peters Out"). We took several steps to ensure the quality of the data. First, following recommendations from Meade and Craig (2012), we excluded participants who incorrectly answered an instructed response item (i.e., "Please select Strongly Agree for this item"). Second, we excluded those who did not complete the behavioral response task (described below). Third, we excluded participants who completed the survey in an unreasonably short amount of time.[2] On the basis of these criteria, we removed from our initial sample of 465 participants 20 cases for missing the instructed response item, 52 for not providing a response to the behavioral task, and 105 for quick response times. Our final sample size was 288 (125 recruited by students, 163 from MTurk).[3] Participants averaged 37 years of age; 55% were women.

We used a moderation-of-process design to test our predictions that manager abuse would be positively related to supervisory ethical leadership and negatively related to abusive supervision because of supervisors' disidentification with their manager. This design implicates process by "manipulating the [proposed psychological mechanism] to moderate the relation between the independent variable and the dependent variable" (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005, p. 850). As Vancouver and Carlson (2015) explain,

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[2] Because using response time as a screening technique implies there is a minimum amount of time required for accurate completion (DeSimone, Harms, & DeSimone, 2015), we conducted a pilot study with (n = 134) university students in a supervised laboratory setting to determine a reasonable completion time. Students averaged 10.36 minutes (SD = 2.69) to complete the study, with the fastest recorded time of 5.88 minutes. In Study 1 we therefore used 7.67 minutes (−1 SD of pilot study mean) as a logical (and perhaps conservative) cutoff (cf. Huang, Curran, Keeney, Poposki, & DeShon, 2012; Huang, Liu, & Bowling, 2015).

[3] One-way ANOVAs using Scheffé's post hoc test to compare MTurk and non-MTurk participants revealed that the former were younger and worked fewer hours per week than did the latter (*ps* < .05). MTurk workers also reported lower ethical leadership intentions and behaviors (*p* < .05). Including a dummy variable (0 = *MTurk*, 1 = *otherwise*) to account for sample differences did not change Study 1 results.

“finding interactions with manipulations, variables, or constructs that might affect the efficiency, rate, or operation of a mechanism . . . implies that mechanism is involved in determining the relationship between a cause and an effect” (p. 70). In other words, we manipulate disidentification (the proposed mechanism), and because it is exogenous rather than endogenous, a significant interaction would not imply that manager abuse causes disidentification but that its effects are transmitted through it. Accordingly, we reasoned that evidence of a supervisor’s “course change” would exist if the relationship between abusive manager behavior and supervisor ethical leadership was positive (and the relationship between abusive manager behavior and abusive supervision negative) when supervisors experienced high levels of relational disidentification. As such, our study involved two levels of abusive manager behavior (high vs. low) and two levels of supervisor relational disidentification (high vs. low).

Participants were provided with a scenario adapted from Burton and Hoobler (2006).[4] They were asked to imagine working in a supervisory position at a café, where their duties included overseeing employees who serve customers and collect payments from them. The café had a suggestions-award program wherein employees were encouraged to submit suggestions to improve the café’s procedures. Participants were informed that, as part of this program, they had recommended to their general manager that the café adopt a just-in-time delivery schedule for its inventory. They had gone out of their way to check with suppliers that the necessary materials could be supplied to the café within 48 hr of an order. Here, we manipulated the abusive behavior of the general manager and participants’ relational disidentification with the manager (see below and Appendix A). We then presented participants with an e-mail sent from one of their subordinates and asked them to draft a reply message. We measured ethical leadership and abusive supervision by coding these responses. Following the scenario, we presented participants with our manipulation check questions, items related to intentions of engaging in ethical leadership and abusive supervision in the scenario, and demographic questions.

Experimental manipulations

Abusive manager behavior

We adapted the instructions used by Burton and Hoobler (2006) to manipulate abusive manager behavior. Participants in the high abusive manager behavior condition were informed that upon reading their suggestion to improve the café, their manager became angry, ridiculed them, and belittled their ideas in front of other café supervisors. By contrast, participants in the low abusive manager behavior condition were told that upon reading their suggestion, their manager understood the suggestion and would pass it along to upper management.

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[4] In our initial submission, we reported results from a version of this study that more closely resembled that conducted by Burton and Hoobler (2006). The study reported here differs in response to comments from the review team. Results from the original study (n = 918) were the same (i.e., they fully supported Hypothesis 1 and partially supported Hypothesis 2) and are available upon request.

Supervisor relational disidentification

After manipulating abusive manager behavior, we provided participants with an additional paragraph in which we manipulated supervisor relational disidentification. Participants in the high disidentification condition were informed that later at the café, when their subordinates asked about the suggestions-award program and how ideas would be received by management, participants (as supervisor) expressed pride in being nothing like the general manager and explained that they shared none of the general manager's values. Rather, they distanced themselves from their manager and his actions. Participants also let their employees know that their values were in direct opposition to those of their general manager. In contrast, participants in the low disidentification condition, when asked about the suggestions-award program and how ideas would be received by management, told their subordinates how the program worked as it was explained to them. They informed their subordinates that they simply passed ideas along to the general manager, who then acted as he saw fit. We developed this manipulation of supervisor relational disidentification based on research suggesting that disidentification stems from being proud that one does not value what the target of disidentification values (Pratt, 2000; Vadera & Pratt, 2013) and work that conceptualizes disidentification as a sense of active separation between one's identity and the identity of the target (Elsbach, 1999; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Measures

Manipulation check: Abusive manager behavior

Three items (α = .92) from Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) were used to check our manipulation of abusive manager behavior: "The general manager ridiculed me," "The general manager probably made negative comments about me to others," and "The general manager told me I'm incompetent." Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Manipulation check: Relational disidentification

We adapted three items (α = .88) from Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) to check our manipulation of disidentification with the general manager: "I was embarrassed to be working with my general manager," "I found the general manager to be disgraceful," and "I wanted people to know that I disagreed with how the general manager behaved." Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Dependent variable: Supervisor ethical leadership and abusive supervision intentions

We adapted Brown et al.'s (2005) 10-item measure (α = .94) to assess participants' intentions to engage in ethical leadership and Mitchell and Ambrose's (2007) five-item (α = .94) measure to gauge intentions to engage in abusive supervision. Participants were asked to indicate how likely (1 = very unlikely; 7 = very likely) they were to engage in ethical or abusive leadership behaviors as café supervisor. Sample items were "I would listen to what my employees have to say" (ethical leadership) and "I would make negative comments about subordinates to others" (abusive supervision).

Dependent variable: Supervisor ethical leadership and abusive supervision behaviors

Following the scenario, participants were informed that one of their subordinates sent them an e-mail with a suggestion to improve the café. Specifically, we provided participants with an advertisement the subordinate had created to use in a Facebook campaign for the café. The advertisement had several grammatical and other mistakes which were likely to be obvious to participants (Appendix B). The ad was designed to allow for variation in ethical leadership and abusive supervision ratings, as participants could respond to the subordinate's good intentions (i.e., to improve the café) and to his or her poor execution (i.e., the errors). Participants were asked to draft a three- to five-sentence e-mail replying to the employee.

We developed our behavioral measures of supervisor ethical leadership and abusive supervision following a two-step procedure. In the first step, two external raters (doctoral-level students in an I/O psychology program) underwent training with one of the authors. We provided the raters with Brown et al.'s (2005) definition and measure of ethical leadership and Tepper's (2000) definition and measure of abusive supervision. The measures were used to illustrate sample ethical and abusive leader behaviors. The raters were then instructed to rate approximately five percent (randomly selected) of the responses generated by all participants from 1 (not ethical at all/not at all abusive) to 9 (very ethical/very abusive).[5] After completing these evaluations, the two raters discussed their ratings with the trainer and resolved any discrepancies.

In the second step, the raters were instructed to independently rate all responses—which were presented in a random order—on the 1 to 9 scales. To construct our measures of ethical leadership and abusive supervision, we averaged the ratings across the two raters. To examine whether aggregation was justified, we calculated the median interrater agreement coefficient rwg[j] (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984) and intraclass correlation coefficients ICC[2,1] and ICC[2,2] (McGraw & Wong, 1996; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). All values were acceptable (rwg[j] = .93; ICC[2,1] = .82; ICC[2,2] = .86), thereby justifying aggregation of ratings across raters (LeBreton & Senter, 2008).

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[5] Because some of the ethical and **abusive** behaviors from Brown et al.'s (2005) and Tepper's (2000) measures are unlikely to manifest themselves in a short email, we did not ask the raters to count the number of ethical or **abusive** behaviors contained therein but to indicate how ethical and **abusive** the written messages were more generally. In this respect, the measures we provided to the raters were illustrative rather than prescriptive. To illustrate, messages rated as highly ethical included sentiments such as the following: "That sounds like a great way to advertise! Would you mind if I altered it a bit to fix a few grammar mistakes I found? I will of course still give you credit for this wonderful ad and I'm sure it will bring us in some great business! Thank you for thinking outside the box and putting forth such great effort to helping our café succeed!" In contrast, messages rated as highly **abusive** included comments like "This text is horrible and contains many mistakes. I would not dare send this to upper management for fear of embarrassment," "You may want to consider taking an English class to improve your grammatical and proofreading skills," and "Please fix you're [*sic*] foolish ways before something happens like you get terminated." The behavioral measures were significantly correlated with participants' reported intentions (ethical $r = .29$, **abusive** $r = .24$, $ps < .001$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks

As expected, participants in the high abusive manager behavior condition reported higher levels of abuse (M = 5.59, SD = 1.13) than those in the low abusive manager behavior condition (M = 2.31, SD = 1.44), t(286) = −21.57, p < .01, d = −2.54. Likewise, participants in the high disidentification condition reported higher levels of disidentification (M = 5.18, SD = 1.65) with the general manager compared with those in the low disidentification condition (M = 4.10, SD = 2.22), t(286) = −4.68, p < .001, d = −.55.

Hypothesis tests

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we conducted univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each outcome variable. Results revealed significant effects for ethical leadership, F(1, 284) = 11.98, p < .001, ηp2 = .04, and abusive supervision, F(1, 284) = 14.84, p < .001, ηp2 = .05, intentions. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants in the high disidentification condition who experienced manager abuse reported higher ethical leadership intentions (M = 6.51, SD = .53) than those who were not mistreated by their manager (M = 5.92, SD = 1.26), t(138) = 3.59, p < .001. In the low disidentification condition, ethical leadership intentions did not vary as a function of manager abuse (Mlow = 6.37, SD = .58; Mhigh = 6.29, SD = .70), t(146) = −.75, p = .45. Results likewise provided support for our prediction concerning abusive supervision as described in Hypothesis 2. Participants in the high disidentification condition who experienced manager abuse reported lower abusive supervision intentions (M = 1.28, SD = .57) than did those who were not mistreated by their manager (M = 1.86, SD = 1.34), t(138) = −3.29, p < .01, and this effect was attenuated in the low disidentification condition (Mlow = 1.19, SD = .39; Mhigh = 1.35, SD = .63), t(146) = 1.90, p = .06.

Turning to behaviors, ANOVAs showed effects for ethical leadership, F(1, 284) = 2.90, p = .09, ηp2 = .01, and abusive supervision, F(1, 284) = 3.14, p = .08, ηp2 = .01. Further supporting our prediction that manager abuse can increase supervisory ethical leadership through the activation of relational disidentification with the manager, participants in the high disidentification condition who experienced manager abuse demonstrated greater ethical leadership behavior (M = 5.42, SD = 1.29) than did those who were not mistreated by their manager (M = 4.94, SD = 1.45), t(138) = 2.09, p = .04. In the low disidentification condition, ethical leadership did not vary as a function of manager abuse (Mlow = 5.13, SD = 1.38, Mhigh = 5.04, SD = 1.50), t(146) = −.35, p = .73. These results provide additional support for Hypothesis 1. Results also showed that participants in the high disidentification condition who experienced manager abuse demonstrated less abusive behavior (M = 2.24, SD = 1.31) than did those who were not abused by their manager (M = 2.58, SD = 1.74), though the difference was not statistically significant, t(138) = −1.30, p = .20. The difference in abusive supervisor behaviors was also nonsignificant in the low disidentification condition (Mlow = 2.44, SD = 1.44; Mhigh = 2.76, SD = 1.74), t(146) = 1.21, p = .23.

Study 1 established that abusive manager behavior can increase supervisors' ethical leadership and reduce abusive supervision as a function of relational disidentification. Although the pattern of results provides support for the idea that abused supervisors "change course" to the extent they disidentify with their managers, the results say nothing about whether the effect of manager abuse varies according to individual differences in supervisors' moral identity. We therefore tested this possibility in Study 2.

Study 2: The Moderating Role of Supervisors' Moral Identity

Despite what social-cognitive theory suggests, studies show that many individuals do not model observed behavior. The rate of transmission of abuse in families, for example, has been estimated at approximately 30% (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987). In this connection, Bandura (1973, 1978) noted that the effects of modeling can be attenuated or counteracted, suggesting that the trickle-down effects we explore are likely moderated. As he explains: "A person can acquire, retain, and possess the capabilities for skillful execution of modeled behavior, but the learning may rarely be activated into overt performance if it is negatively sanctioned or otherwise unfavorably received" (Bandura, 1973, pp. 71–72). Other factors must therefore be involved in deterring an individual's motivation to perpetuate abuse. While there might exist several mitigating factors, Bandura (1979) noted that they often arise from personal factors that operate through comparisons of perceived conduct to internal standards.

In this respect, social-cognitive theory suggests trickle-down effects may not occur if the modeled behavior is inconsistent with or otherwise violates the observer's internalized personal standards (Bandura, 1973). In other words, the result is "a motivating influence to keep behavior in line with adopted standards" (Bandura, 1978, p. 24). Providing support for this idea, Bandura (1973) observed that modeling of aggressive behavior was thwarted when individuals were "firm in defending their principles" (p. 94). In another study (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963), he found that modeling of aggressive behavior was unlikely to occur among individuals whose value systems outweighed rewarding consequences for the behavior. These findings suggest one's moral identity can prevent the spread of abusive behavior.

Moral identity refers to an individual's tendency to feel strongly about the importance of a set of moral traits (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Prior research has identified two aspects of moral identity: symbolization and internalization. The former captures the degree to which these moral traits (e.g., caring, compassion, honesty) are reflected in one's choices and actions, whereas the latter reflects the degree to which such traits are central to one's self-concept. Although these definitions suggest the symbolization dimension is more closely tied to one's (e.g., moral) behavior, Jennings, Mitchell, and Hannah's (2015) review of empirical research on the moral self shows that the internalization dimension is more consistently linked to ethical and unethical (e.g., abusive) actions. Also pertinent to the present study is Brown and Mitchell's (2010) observation that "internalization mitigates learning effects of unethical leaders" (p. 599).

We expect supervisor moral identity will moderate the extent to which the experience of manager abuse prompts relational disidentification for several reasons. For example, because individuals with strong moral identities consider moral traits (e.g., honesty, fairness) to be an important part of what guides their behavior, they are likely to distance themselves from managers whose abusive behaviors appear contrary to those traits. Similarly, disidentification is likely to occur when an individual perceives that other organization members have violated important personal values (Lai, Chan, & Lam, 2013). Because supervisors with high moral identities have a strong sense of the importance of moral traits (Aquino & Reed, 2002), they are more likely than those with low moral identities to view abusive manager behavior as violating important (e.g., moral) values. Accordingly, high moral identity supervisors should be more likely than their low moral identity counterparts to experience strong negative feelings toward an abusive manager and actively separate (i.e., cognitively) from that manager's espoused values and actions.

Relational disidentification also occurs when individuals view themselves as possessing characteristics (e.g., moral identity) that are direct opposites of those of one's relational partner (Becker & Tausch, 2014; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Because acts of manager abuse are likely seen as directly countering values that comprise one's moral identity, supervisors with high moral identities are more likely to disidentify with abusive manager behavior than are those supervisors with lower moral identity levels. Conversely, we anticipate that manager abuse is less likely to prompt relational disidentification among supervisors who place little self-importance on their moral identities. We therefore hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 3: Supervisor moral identity will moderate the relationship between abusive manager behavior and relational disidentification with the manager, such that the relationship is stronger (weaker) for supervisors with high (low) moral identity.

Method

Participants and procedure

Study 2 was an online experiment involving 462 adults recruited from an upper-level management course at a university in the southeastern United States. Participants averaged 25 years of age; 52% were women. The experiment was conducted in two waves, 2 weeks apart. In the first wave, participants were given information about the study and were asked to respond to questions that included our moral identity measure and filler questions. In the second wave, we presented participants with a scenario in the form of an e-mail exchange between the participant, who was a supervisor of a four-person task force in his or her organization, and his or her manager and subordinates. We adapted this scenario from Farh and Chen (2014). We manipulated abusive manager behavior by presenting participants with different emails from the manager (see below and Appendix C). Emails from the subordinates were identical in both conditions. We included these latter emails so that our scenario was representative of e-mail exchanges that may occur in any organization. After reading the scenario, participants were asked to respond to our supervisor relational disidentification measure, demographic measures, and to items used to check our manipulation.[6]

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[6] To ensure the manipulation check did not introduce any unwanted or extraneous influences into the experiment, we randomly counterbalanced the manipulation check such that it occurred immediately after the email exchange for some participants and after our measurement of the dependent variables for other participants (Kidd, 1976). We likewise counterbalanced the order of the manipulation check and outcome measures in Study 1.

Manipulation: Abusive manager behavior

All participants received an e-mail from their manager. The entire task force was copied on this e-mail. In both conditions, the manager acknowledged the difficulties encountered by the task force. In the high abusive manager behavior condition, the e-mail included several negative and demeaning comments about the participant's contributions and leadership style. By contrast, in the low abusive manager behavior condition, the e-mail maintained a neutral tone.

Measures

Manipulation check: Abusive manager behavior

We used the same three-item measure ($\alpha = .96$) from Study 1 to check our manipulation of abusive manager behavior.

Moderating variable: Moral identity

We gauged supervisors' moral identity with the internalization dimension of Aquino and Reed's (2002) measure. We used this subdimension because it is consistent with our interests and theoretical rationale, and because it is considered a more robust predictor of moral behavior (see Jennings et al., 2015). The measure asked participants to visualize the kind of person who is caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind, and then to respond to five statements ($\alpha = .73$) using a Likert response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am" and "I strongly desire to have these characteristics."

Dependent variable: Supervisor relational disidentification

We assessed supervisor relational disidentification with the measure used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .92$).

Results and Discussion

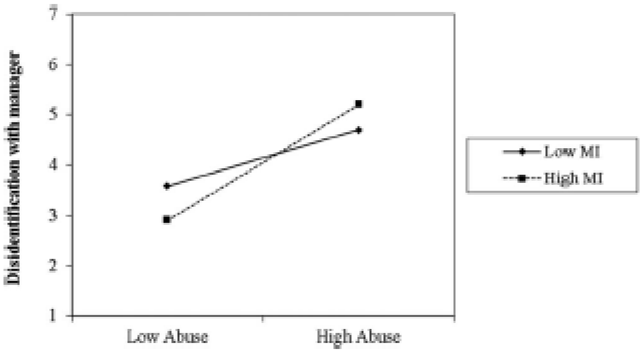
Manipulation check

Participants in the high abusive manager behavior condition reported higher levels of abuse ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.41$) than those in the low abusive manager behavior condition ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.66$, $t459 = -17.44$, $p < .01$).

Hypothesis tests

To Test Hypothesis 3, we performed an ANOVA with manager abuse as a fixed factor and supervisor moral identity as a random factor. Supporting our prediction that supervisor moral identity moderates the positive relationship between abusive manager behavior and relational disidentification as predicted in Hypothesis 3, we found a significant interaction between experimental condition (high vs. low manager abuse) and participants' moral identity, $F(1,458) = 14.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta p2 = .02$. As illustrated in Figure 2, the positive effect of manager abuse on disidentification was stronger among participants with higher moral identity levels, $t(458) = 10.90$, $p < .001$, and weaker among those with lower moral identity, $t(458) = 5.10$, $p < .001$.

Figure 2. Study 2. Interactive effect of abusive manager behavior and supervisor moral identity on supervisor disidentification. The positive relationship between manager abuse and disidentification is stronger among supervisors with high (+1 SD) than those with low (−1 SD) moral identity (MI).



Collectively, Studies 1 and 2 offer evidence to suggest that abused supervisors engage in more ethical leadership and less abusive supervision as a function of disidentification with their manager, which is more likely to result among supervisors with high moral identity. Because neither study examined the downstream consequences of manager abuse via supervisors' relational disidentification with their manager as being conditional on their moral identity levels, we investigated in Study 3 whether manager abuse translates into more ethical leadership and less abusive supervisory behaviors via relational disidentification, and whether these indirect effects are conditional on supervisors' moral identity.

Study 3: An Integrated Conceptual Framework

In extending our logic as it relates to downstream consequences, we predict that supervisors' moral identity will moderate the indirect effects of manager abuse on their ethical leadership and abusive supervision via relational disidentification. Because individuals with high moral identities desire to act in ways that would identify them as having a moral code of conduct (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009), we expect such supervisors would distinguish themselves from their abusive managers with acts of ethical leadership and less abusive supervision. Such responses (prompted by disidentification) reflect conduct that is consistent with their internalized moral values. Supporting this view, Greenbaum, Mawritz, Mayer, and Priesemuth (2013) found that supervisors with strong moral identities tend to respond to manager abuse with normatively appropriate behavior, suggesting they would engage in greater ethical leadership. Moreover, this research suggests supervisors with high moral identities are more likely than those with low moral identities to ask "What is the right thing to do?" and to determine that deviant responses (e.g., engaging in abusive supervisory behaviors themselves) are inappropriate.

We further reasoned that supervisor moral identity would moderate the indirect effects of manager abuse on supervisors' ethical leadership and abusive supervision (via relational disidentification) because moral identity "reinforces individuals' ethical stance and enables them to react to different situations more effectively and ethically than individuals with a weaker moral self" (Jennings et al., 2015, p. S152). Reflecting the notion that such positive reactions are driven by disidentification is research demonstrating that individuals sometimes disidentify with in-groups that violate personally important moral standards. That is, disidentification is thought to be more likely to occur and subsequently influence behavior when individuals perceive that a model's actions run counter to their personal moral values (Glasford, Pratto, & Dovidio, 2008). In contrast, because supervisors with comparatively lower moral identity levels consider moral traits less important to their self-concept, we expected that the indirect effects of manager abuse on their ethical leadership and abusive supervision (as carried by relational disidentification) would be weaker for this group.

We therefore anticipate that the indirect effects of abusive manager behavior on supervisors' ethical leadership and abusive supervision (as transmitted by relational disidentification) would be stronger among supervisors with high moral identity and weaker among those with lower moral identity levels. Our expectation corresponds to a form of moderated mediation (Edwards & Lambert, 2007) in which the first stage of the indirect effects—that is, the relationship between manager abuse and relational disidentification—varies according to individual differences in supervisors' moral identity levels. Stated formally, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 4: Supervisor moral identity will moderate the indirect effect of abusive manager behavior on supervisor ethical leadership via relational disidentification, such that the indirect effect will be stronger (weaker) for supervisors with high (low) moral identity. This moderation will occur at the first stage of the indirect effect.

Hypothesis 5: Supervisor moral identity will moderate the indirect effect of abusive manager behavior on abusive supervision via relational disidentification, such that the indirect effect will be stronger (weaker) for supervisors with high (low) moral identity. This moderation will occur at the first stage of the indirect effect.

Method

Participants and procedure

We collected data from 500 full-time employees working in teams and their supervisors from multiple organizations across various industries in India. We recruited a market research firm, Knowledge Intercept, to collect data. The research firm maintains a panel of more than 10,000 working adults who have volunteered to participate in market and academic research. The firm independently verifies the identity and employment status of panel members and follows a data collection procedure similar to that used by Qualtrics and StudyResponse, both of which are used to collect data for academic research (e.g., Kouchaki & Desai, 2015; Wellman, Mayer, Ong, & DeRue, 2016). Specifically, before they are recruited, panelists are asked a series of profiling questions such as their age, gender, income, and employing organization. For each study, the firm tries to ensure that high quality panelists are recruited. To do so, it has stringent recruitment checks, such as using invite-only surveys and verifying panelists' permanent account number (PAN; equivalent to a social security number in the United States).

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger study on leadership in teams. This study is the first publication from this broader data collection effort and was approved by the Singapore Management University Institutional Review Board (SMU IRB number IRB-16–057-A068(816), “A Comparison of the Interactive Effects of Individual and Contextual Factors in Facilitating Positive and Negative Behaviors in Individuals and Teams”). The research firm was hired to collect data from members of 100 teams with at least five members and from their supervisors. For teams with more than five members, data were collected for five members selected at random. It is likely that some teams had exactly five members and that some teams were larger, but we were not provided this information. Rather, for every team in our sample, we received data from exactly five members. To collect these data, Knowledge Intercept initially contacted 1,000 members of its panel located in two major cities in India to participate in the study. In this initial communication, participants were informed of the nature of the study and of the need to collect data from at least five team members and team leaders (i.e., supervisors). After individuals consented to participate, they provided the names and e-mail addresses of the other members of their team to the firm, which then sent surveys to participants, their team members, and their supervisors. The firm received completed surveys from 79 teams (i.e., 79 supervisors and 395 employees). Because we had requested data from 100 teams, the firm then contacted 500 more working adults from its panel, yielding data from 21 additional teams (i.e., 21 supervisors and 105 employees). All participants received 300 INR (approximately 5 USD) based on an analysis of wages of likely participants using data from www.payscale.com, and all surveys were administered in English. After data collection was completed, we had five research assistants contact one member randomly selected from each team to see if he or she had participated in the study. All participants who were contacted reported participating in the study.

The employee questionnaire contained measures of supervisors’ abusive and ethical leadership behaviors. The supervisor questionnaire assessed supervisors’ moral identity, their relational disidentification with their manager and their manager’s abusive behavior. The employee sample was 88% male; employees averaged 32 years of age (SD = 5.9) and reported working an average of 5 years (SD = 3.1) in their organizations. The supervisor sample was 89% male; supervisors averaged 35 years of age (SD = 6.6) and reported working an average of 6 years (SD = 4.2) in their organization. Employees had an average of 7 years of work experience (SD = 5.1), whereas supervisors averaged 11 years (SD = 7.2). Most participants (68%) were employed in the IT and telecommunications industries, but sample members engaged in a variety of work and held job titles such as graphic designer, accountant, software developer, manager, administrator, and project engineer.

Measures

All measures were rated using a Likert response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) unless otherwise noted.

Abusive manager behavior and abusive supervisor behavior

Tepper’s (2000) 15-item abusive supervision measure was completed by employees ($\alpha = .95$) and their supervisors ($\alpha = .93$). Each item was rated using a 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). Sample items included "My supervisor ridicules me" and "My supervisor puts me down in front of others."

Supervisor ethical leadership

Employees assessed their supervisors' ethical leadership with Brown et al.'s (2005) 10-item measure (α = .96). Sample items include "My supervisor sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics" and "My supervisor conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner."

Relational disidentification

We assessed the extent to which supervisors disidentified with their managers using two items (α = .82) adapted from Kreiner and Ashforth's (2004) measure. The measure was modified by assessing participants' manager (rather than organization) and by excluding items that were irrelevant or inappropriate when used with the manager referent. Participants responded to the following statements: "I am embarrassed of my supervisor" and "I want people to know that I disagree with how my supervisor behaves."

Supervisor moral identity

As in Study 2, moral identity was assessed with the five-item (α = .72) internalization subscale from Aquino and Reed's (2002) measure.

Control variables

We controlled for subordinates' and supervisors' age, gender, education, and organizational tenure because supervisors may be more likely to engage in ethical behavior and less likely to engage in abusive behavior toward employees of higher social status (as reflected in these demographic variables; Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, & Zivnuska, 2011). Moreover, research informed by relational demography theories suggests similarities between supervisors and subordinates on these variables could influence supervisor behavior (see, e.g., Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Mawritz et al., 2012; Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011). Age and tenure were measured in years. Gender was coded 0 = female, 1 = male. Education was coded 1 = high school, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = masters/postgraduate degree, 4 = doctorate degree. In addition, we controlled for the symbolization aspect of moral identity in this case because there are some suggestions that it can affect ethical and unethical (e.g., abusive) reactions to mistreatment (e.g., Barclay, Whiteside, & Aquino, 2014; Blasi, 1984). We measured moral identity symbolization with Aquino and Reed's (2002) five-item measure (α = .77).

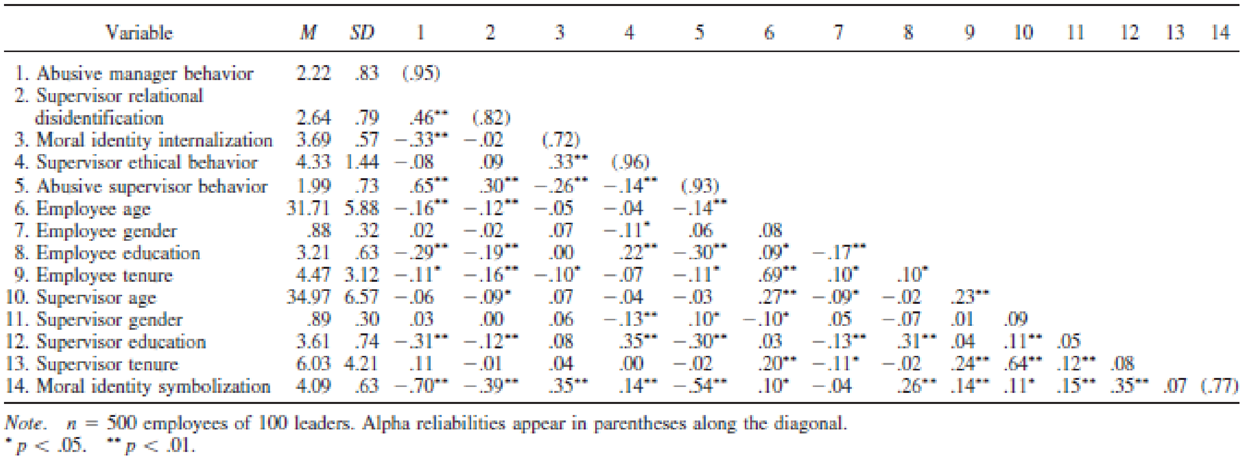
Data analysis

Because individuals in the same work unit responded to survey questions concerning the same supervisor, the data take on a two-level structure, with team members nested in supervisors. We therefore tested our hypotheses using multilevel path analysis with Mplus 7.31 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015). Multilevel path analysis allows researchers to investigate complex models that include multiple dependent variables and to test all relationships simultaneously (Heck & Thomas, 2015). We grand-mean centered the variables (i.e., at participants' means; Enders & Tofighi, 2007) and estimated conditional indirect effects with MacKinnon, Lockwood, and Williams's (2004) bootstrapping approach (using 20,000 samples), in line with recommendations by Shrout and Bolger (2002). Predictions for each outcome variable (i.e., Hypotheses 4 and 5) were tested simultaneously. Following Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang (2010, p. 217, fn 11) and recent multilevel mediation research (e.g., Lanaj, Johnson, & Wang, 2016; Uy, Lin, & Ilies, 2017), we used a 90% confidence interval (CI) to determine significance for the hypothesized conditional indirect effects. We used this criterion because our hypotheses were directional and theory-driven (Jones, 1952, 1954; Kimmel, 1957).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics, coefficient alphas, and correlations for all study variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Study 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables



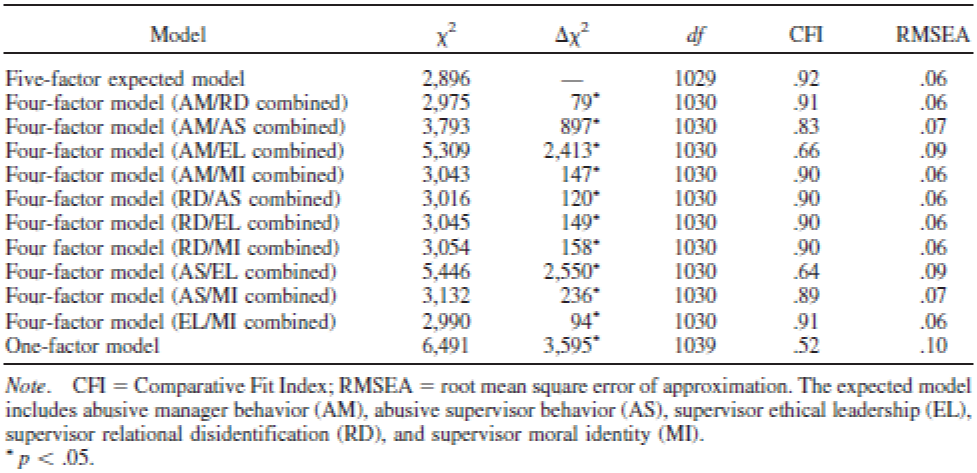
Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Abusive manager behavior	2.22	.83	(.95)													
2. Supervisor relational disidentification	2.64	.79	$.46^{**}$	(.82)												
3. Moral identity internalization	3.69	.57	$-.33^{**}$	−.02	(.72)											
4. Supervisor ethical behavior	4.33	1.44	−.08	.09	$.33^{**}$	(.96)										
5. Abusive supervisor behavior	1.99	.73	$.65^{**}$	$.30^{**}$	$-.26^{**}$	$-.14^{**}$	(.93)									
6. Employee age	31.71	5.88	$-.16^{**}$	$-.12^{**}$	−.05	−.04	$-.14^{**}$									
7. Employee gender	.88	.32	.02	−.02	.07	$-.11^{*}$	.06	.08								
8. Employee education	3.21	.63	$-.29^{**}$	$-.19^{**}$	.00	$.22^{**}$	$-.30^{**}$	$.09^{*}$	$-.17^{**}$							
9. Employee tenure	4.47	3.12	$-.11^{*}$	$-.16^{**}$	$-.10^{*}$	−.07	$-.11^{*}$	$.69^{**}$	$.10^{*}$	$.10^{*}$						
10. Supervisor age	34.97	6.57	−.06	$-.09^{*}$	.07	−.04	−.03	$.27^{**}$	$-.09^{*}$	−.02	$.23^{**}$					
11. Supervisor gender	.89	.30	.03	.00	.06	$-.13^{**}$	$.10^{*}$	$-.10^{*}$	.05	−.07	.01	.09				
12. Supervisor education	3.61	.74	$-.31^{**}$	$-.12^{**}$	.08	$.35^{**}$	$-.30^{**}$	.03	$-.13^{**}$	$.31^{**}$	.04	$.11^{**}$	.05			
13. Supervisor tenure	6.03	4.21	.11	−.01	.04	.00	−.02	$.20^{**}$	$-.11^{*}$	−.02	$.24^{**}$	$.64^{**}$	$.12^{**}$	.08		
14. Moral identity symbolization	4.09	.63	$-.70^{**}$	$-.39^{**}$	$.35^{**}$	$.14^{**}$	$-.54^{**}$	$.10^{*}$	−.04	$.26^{**}$	$.14^{**}$	$.11^{*}$	$.15^{**}$	$.35^{**}$	.07	(.77)

Note. $n = 500$ employees of 100 leaders. Alpha reliabilities appear in parentheses along the diagonal.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

Preliminary analyses

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to evaluate the discriminant validity of the study variables. Given the nested nature of our data, we employed the "Cluster" and "Type=Complex" syntax in Mplus (see Liu et al., 2015). This approach adjusts for the standard errors using a sandwich estimator to account for nonindependence because of employees' clustering within supervisory groups (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015). The expected five-variable model (abusive manager behavior, abusive supervisor behavior, supervisor ethical leadership, supervisor relational disidentification, supervisor moral identity) demonstrated acceptable fit to the data ($\chi2 = 2{,}896$, df = 1029, Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = .92, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .06) and a significantly better fit ($p < .05$) than alternative models in which the focal study constructs were variously combined (Table 2). We further assessed discriminant validity by examining standardized factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) estimates. Demonstrating discriminant validity, the square root of each variable’s AVE estimate was larger than its correlations with other study constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2: Study 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis



Model	χ^2	$\Delta\chi^2$	*df*	CFI	RMSEA
Five-factor expected model	2,896	—	1029	.92	.06
Four-factor model (AM/RD combined)	2,975	79*	1030	.91	.06
Four-factor model (AM/AS combined)	3,793	897*	1030	.83	.07
Four-factor model (AM/EL combined)	5,309	2,413*	1030	.66	.09
Four-factor model (AM/MI combined)	3,043	147*	1030	.90	.06
Four-factor model (RD/AS combined)	3,016	120*	1030	.90	.06
Four-factor model (RD/EL combined)	3,045	149*	1030	.90	.06
Four factor model (RD/MI combined)	3,054	158*	1030	.90	.06
Four-factor model (AS/EL combined)	5,446	2,550*	1030	.64	.09
Four-factor model (AS/MI combined)	3,132	236*	1030	.89	.07
Four-factor model (EL/MI combined)	2,990	94*	1030	.91	.06
One-factor model	6,491	3,595*	1039	.52	.10

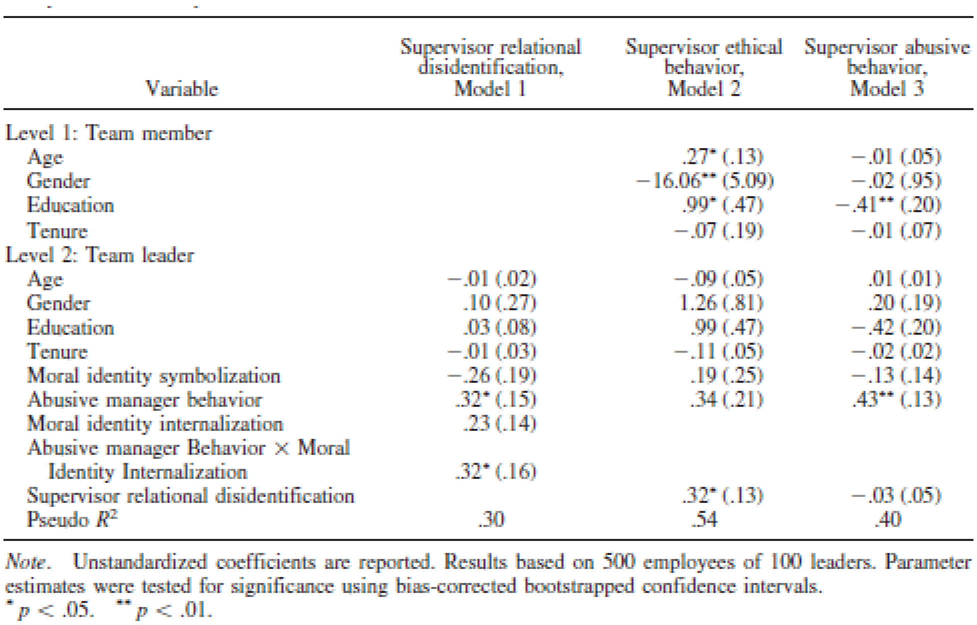
Note. CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. The expected model includes abusive manager behavior (AM), abusive supervisor behavior (AS), supervisor ethical leadership (EL), supervisor relational disidentification (RD), and supervisor moral identity (MI).

* $p < .05$.

Hypothesis tests

In Hypothesis 4 we proposed that supervisor moral identity would moderate the indirect effect of abusive manager behavior on supervisor ethical leadership via relational disidentification. We calculated the conditional indirect effects using information reported in Table 3. Whereas Model 1 shows that abusive manager behavior and supervisor moral identity interacted to predict relational disidentification (b = .32, p < .05), Model 2 shows that relational disidentification was positively associated with supervisor ethical behavior (b = .32, p < .05). As seen in Table 4, the indirect effect of manager abuse on ethical behavior was positive (ab = .17) at high levels of moral identity, because the 90% CI did not contain zero (.02, .31). Table 4 likewise shows that at lower levels of moral identity, the indirect effect was not significant (ab = .04), because the 90% CI contained zero (−.08, .16). Moreover, the indirect effect was stronger at higher levels of moral identity than at lower levels (p < .10). These effects are illustrated in Figure 3. Taken together, these results provide support for Hypothesis 4: The indirect effect of manager abuse on supervisor ethical leadership (via relational disidentification) is conditional on supervisors’ level of moral identity.

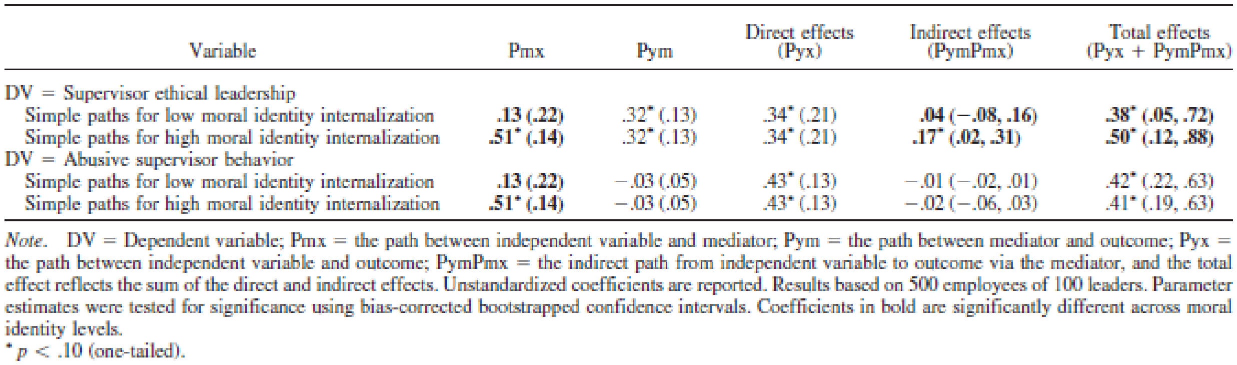
Table 3: Study 3: Path Analysis Results



Variable	Supervisor relational disidentification, Model 1	Supervisor ethical behavior, Model 2	Supervisor abusive behavior, Model 3
Level 1: Team member			
Age		.27* (.13)	−.01 (.05)
Gender		−16.06** (5.09)	−.02 (.95)
Education		.99* (.47)	−.41** (.20)
Tenure		−.07 (.19)	−.01 (.07)
Level 2: Team leader			
Age	−.01 (.02)	−.09 (.05)	.01 (.01)
Gender	.10 (.27)	1.26 (.81)	.20 (.19)
Education	.03 (.08)	.99 (.47)	−.42 (.20)
Tenure	−.01 (.03)	−.11 (.05)	−.02 (.02)
Moral identity symbolization	−.26 (.19)	.19 (.25)	−.13 (.14)
Abusive manager behavior	.32* (.15)	.34 (.21)	.43** (.13)
Moral identity internalization	.23 (.14)		
Abusive manager Behavior × Moral Identity Internalization	.32* (.16)		
Supervisor relational disidentification		.32* (.13)	−.03 (.05)
Pseudo R^2	.30	.54	.40

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Results based on 500 employees of 100 leaders. Parameter estimates were tested for significance using bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

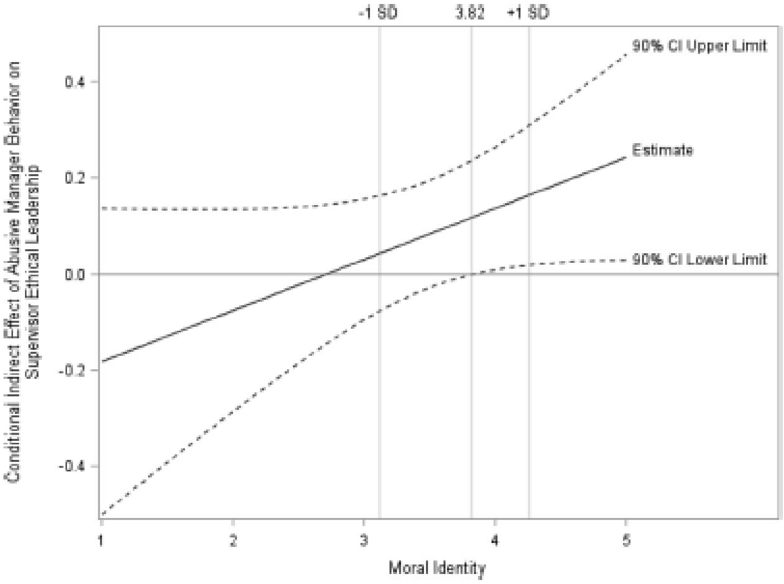
Table 4: Study 3 Path Analytic Results: Indirect and Total Effects of Manager Abuse (via Supervisor Relational Disidentification) on Supervisors' Ethical and Abusive Behavior at Low and High Levels of Moral Identity Internalization



Variable	Pmx	Pym	Direct effects (Pyx)	Indirect effects (PymPmx)	Total effects (Pyx + PymPmx)
DV = Supervisor ethical leadership					
Simple paths for low moral identity internalization	**.13 (.22)**	.32* (.13)	.34* (.21)	**.04 (−.08, .16)**	**.38* (.05, .72)**
Simple paths for high moral identity internalization	**.51* (.14)**	.32* (.13)	.34* (.21)	**.17* (.02, .31)**	**.50* (.12, .88)**
DV = Abusive supervisor behavior					
Simple paths for low moral identity internalization	**.13 (.22)**	−.03 (.05)	.43* (.13)	−.01 (−.02, .01)	.42* (.22, .63)
Simple paths for high moral identity internalization	**.51* (.14)**	−.03 (.05)	.43* (.13)	−.02 (−.06, .03)	.41* (.19, .63)

Note. DV = Dependent variable; Pmx = the path between independent variable and mediator; Pym = the path between mediator and outcome; Pyx = the path between independent variable and outcome; PymPmx = the indirect path from independent variable to outcome via the mediator, and the total effect reflects the sum of the direct and indirect effects. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Results based on 500 employees of 100 leaders. Parameter estimates were tested for significance using bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals. Coefficients in bold are significantly different across moral identity levels.
$^{*}p < .10$ (one-tailed).

Figure 3. Study 3. Conditional indirect effect of abusive manager behavior and supervisor ethical leadership via relational disidentification. The indirect effect is positive and significant when moral identity is equal to or greater than 3.82 (on a 5-point scale).



Hypothesis 5 posited that the indirect effect of manager abuse on abusive supervision via relational disidentification would be moderated by supervisor moral identity. Again, we calculated the conditional indirect effects using information reported in Table 3. As noted, Model 1 shows that the interaction involving abusive manager behavior and supervisor moral identity predicted relational disidentification (b = .32, p < .05). Model 3, however, shows that relational disidentification was not associated with abusive supervisor behavior (b = −.03, nonsignificant [ns]). As seen in Table 4, the indirect effect of manager abuse on abusive supervisory behavior was not significant at either high (ab = −.02, 90% CI = −.06, .03) or low (ab = −.01, 90% CI = −.02, .01) moral identity levels, as zero fell within the CI for the indirect effect at both levels. As a result, we cannot conclude that the indirect effect was stronger at higher moral identity than at lower moral identity levels (p = .57). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.[7,8]

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[7] Following best practice recommendations (Becker, 2005; Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016), we note that Study 3 results differ slightly depending on whether control variables are included or not. When control variables were excluded from analysis, the conditional indirect effect of manager abuse on supervisory ethical leadership (Hypothesis 4) was in the same direction and of the same approximate magnitude as that reported, but the difference between the indirect effects at high and low moral identity levels was not significant. Supplementary analyses by Bernerth, Cole, Taylor, and Walker (2018) reveal this is not an uncommon occurrence in leadership research and suggest further exploration is necessary to understand its cause (J. Bernerth, personal communication, February 27, 2017). Indeed, as Becker (2005) observes, "this suggests further study of the role of the controls in the phenomenon of interest" (p. 286).

[8] In response to a request from the review team, we also tested an alternative model in which moral identity internalization also moderated the direct effects of manager abuse on supervisor ethical leadership and abusive supervision (i.e., first stage and direct effect moderation; Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Moral identity moderated the direct effects of manager abuse on supervisors' ethical leadership and abusive supervision. Overall, results are very similar to those reported in Tables 3 and 4, support Hypothesis 4 but not Hypothesis 5, and are available upon request.

General Discussion

In this research, we examined when and why supervisors would “break the cycle” of abusive behavior in organizations. Departing from prior empirical research examining trickle-down effects, we explored whether abused supervisors would react in ways contrary to social-cognitive theory predictions and their own managers’ abusive behavior. We relied on theory and findings from the identity and developmental psychology literatures to develop and test predictions suggesting abused supervisors might become ethical role models for (and less abusive toward) their own subordinates to the extent they resolved to disidentify with their managers’ abusive ways. We also explored the possibility that some supervisors—namely, those with a strong moral identity—would be more likely to “change course” and thus less likely to perpetuate abuse among their own subordinates.

Results from Study 1 supported our contention that supervisors who experience relational disidentification display more ethical leadership and less abusive supervision in the face of abuse from their managers, and Studies 2 and 3 provided evidence that supervisors’ moral identity moderates the direct and indirect effects of abusive manager behavior. High moral identity levels were shown in Study 2 to enhance the positive effect of manager abuse on relational disidentification. Study 3 further revealed that supervisors with high moral identity levels are more likely to disidentify with their abusive managers and, in turn, to demonstrate ethical leadership (but not less abusive supervision) with their own subordinates.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

In general, we have shown that there are limits to the social learning processes whereby superiors model abusive behaviors for their subordinates and abuse trickles down as a result. We have argued that the cycle of abuse need not occur in organizations, just as evidence in the development literature shows that abusive parenting does not always lead the next generation of parents to become repeat offenders, abusing their own children. The processes that interrupt the cycle from one generation of parents to the next are not well understood, however, and the same can be said regarding the cycle of abuse in organizations. The evidence regarding trickle-down effects does not account for this interruption, as it only points to one set of processes, namely those that involve the most straightforward implications drawn from social-cognitive theory.

Given Bandura’s question about deviating from modeled behavior rather than emulating it, we were intrigued by scenarios that support an opposing view to the one typically derived from social-cognitive theory—instances in which a supervisor’s resolve is not weakened by his or her manager’s abusive behavior, but is actually strengthened by it. Beyond social learning processes, we proposed that relational disidentification might also have a bearing on trickle-down effects. Therefore, we reasoned disidentification with one’s abusive manager could function as an alternative explanatory mechanism linking manager abuse and supervisors’ ethical and abusive behaviors. By drawing on theory and findings from diverse literatures to posit relational disidentification as an additional reason why such a change of course might occur, and finding support for our predictions across two experiments and a field study, we hope to lay a foundation for future investigations that provides opportunities to extend theory and research on trickle-down effects. Given the dearth of research examining disidentification processes

(Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), the current investigation extends abusive supervision as one antecedent factor.

In addition to supervisors' ethical leadership, we proposed that relational disidentification prompted by manager abuse could also influence supervisors' abusive behavior, effectively demonstrating that so-called trickle-down effects can "peter out." Our findings belied this idea, however, perhaps because trickle-down effects are often transmitted via the learning processes described in social-cognitive theory (e.g., role modeling) rather than via relational disidentification. Few empirical studies have actually measured role modeling influences (Wo et al., 2015), however, and most work examining mechanisms by which abusive supervision exerts effects has investigated mediating variables in isolation (Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017; see also Fischer, Dietz, & Antonakis, 2017). It might also be the case that we did not find support for Hypothesis 5 because relational disidentification and abusive supervisor behavior were positively correlated (see Table 3), contrary to our expectations. Whatever the case, given various explanations regarding the nature of trickle-down effects, one way future research could shed light on our null results is by testing multiple mediating mechanisms simultaneously.

Another avenue for extending research on the trickle-down phenomenon comes from the behavioral ethics literature. Ethics scholars have long noted that unjust and degrading treatment can incite feelings of moral indignation and moral outrage (Garfinkel, 1956; McCormick, 1977). Because these concepts reflect a special type of anger provoked by the violation of moral standards or principles (Haidt, 2003), it stands to reason that abusive manager behavior could prompt these negative feelings in the supervisors reporting to them. Providing some support for this view, related research suggests negative role models can produce moral indignation among observers (Baden, 2014). Thus, organizational researchers interested in understanding trickle-down processes might look to the literatures on ethics or moral emotions for additional theoretical extensions.

Our results likewise have practical implications for organizations trying to stem the course of abusive behavior throughout an organization. If efforts to short-circuit the modeling of bad behaviors via social-cognitive processes are to be successful, organizations would do well to select supervisors whose moral identity is highly self-defining or to strengthen the moral identities of incumbents. Recent research (Nicholson & Carroll, 2013) suggests one-way organizations might do the latter is by "undoing" the identities of supervisors who perpetuate the cycle of abuse. Organizational efforts aimed at promoting moral standards and norms would help decrease incidences of supervisory abuse and reduce the spread of such behavior and its downstream consequences.

Our study also highlights one silver lining to come from the dark cloud cast by abusive supervision. Though we would not recommend abusive treatment as a way to evoke ethical behavior, our results suggest individuals might be able to inoculate themselves from the abuses of their supervisor through disidentification, which can lead to more ethical behavior. More broadly, the notion that harm can evoke good is consistent with literature on resilience and work on coping with major life stressors (e.g., Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The abusive supervision literature, to date, does not offer a great deal of hope in terms of interventions to stop the cycle of abuse, so we recommend leveraging insights from other literatures to identify or develop interventions that could evoke the sort of transformation in perspective and functioning needed to help abused supervisors not only stop the transmission of abusive behavior, but also to forge a new course of action. Implementing programs of this sort could help abused supervisors reach a “turning point” (McAdams, 1993) and ultimately help foster more respectful and ethical behavior in the workplace. We encourage future researchers to explore these possibilities.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the strengths and contributions of our studies, we caution readers to interpret our findings in light of certain limitations. We suggest these limitations be viewed as opportunities for future research into the trickle-down of abusive behavior. Some potential limitations concern the experimental vignette methodology we employed in Studies 1 and 2. Whereas vignette experiments allow for strong inferences regarding causality and possess high internal validity (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), we acknowledge that results from Studies 1 and 2 are based on hypothetical scenarios that may reflect participants’ implicit theories. To scholars who wish to study the effects of abusive supervision in an experimental context, we suggest capturing participants’ behaviors rather than their intentions (as we did in Study 1), as Tepper et al. (2017) note that studies measuring the former have “better ecological validity” than those measuring the latter (p. 131). Even so, we recognize that the measures employed in Study 1 to gauge ethical and abusive behaviors require further validation in future research. We also suggest future experimental studies involve participants experiencing abuse from “real” people (e.g., confederates) rather than simply reading about abusive experiences, as this sort of manipulation provides “a better blueprint for experimental examination of abusive supervision” and “insights in which we can have confidence and draw meaningful comparisons to what emerges in field studies” (Tepper et al., 2017, p. 132).

We also acknowledge that Studies 1 and 2 did not capture the “sustained” nature of abusive supervision. Although we made an effort in Study 1 to ensure that the manager’s abusive behavior occurred across more than one incident, our manipulations in Studies 1 and 2 do not perfectly reflect sustained abuse. Future scholars might therefore design experiments in which participants experience several incidents of supervisory abuse and observe how participants’ attitudinal and behavioral reactions change across events. Such a study might be implemented with a policy capturing design (see Karren & Barringer, 2002), in which participants are asked to make decisions in response to a series of scenarios where a supervisor’s abusive behaviors (and possibly other cues) are manipulated, so that participants’ decisions are regressed on the cues to make inferences about their judgment policies. Of course, scholars could also conduct field studies that track real incidents of abusive supervision in actual organizations as they occur across time (see Cole, Shipp, & Taylor, 2016).

Some readers might also be concerned about the small effects observed in Studies 1 and 2. As results from both studies were derived from statistical interactions, we should note for comparison purposes that the median effect size for interaction effects reported in Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel Psychology, and Academy of Management Journal across 30 years was .002 (Aguinis, Beaty, Boik, & Pierce, 2005). Moreover, recent meta-analytic findings demonstrate that Cohen’s (1988) benchmarks to categorize small, medium, and large effects “present unrealistically high values for the applied psychology context” (Bosco, Aguinis, Singh, Field, & Pierce, 2015, p. 441). Nonetheless, to the extent that “larger effect sizes indicate better understanding of a phenomenon” (Bosco et al., 2015, p. 431), we reiterate that the disidentification process posited to interrupt trickle-down effects is not well understood and requires further study in future research.

A final limitation is that the conceptual framework we tested does not include other cognitive, affective, or behavioral mechanisms that may explain the trickle-down process. Aside from disidentification, other influences such as displaced aggression or self-regulation could carry the effects of manager abuse to supervisors’ attitudes and behaviors (see, e.g., Ambrose, Schminke, & Mayer, 2013; Lee, Kim, Bhave, & Duffy, 2016; Wo et al., 2015). Additional studies examining multiple mechanisms simultaneously would thereby enhance the exploration of how, when, and why trickle-down effects might veer one way (negative) or the other (positive). Pitting various theoretical mechanisms against one another like this can contribute to strong inference and theory pruning (Leavitt, Mitchell, & Peterson, 2010).

Conclusion

Just as supervisors play a key role in transmitting abusive behavior across an organization’s levels, so too are they critical in “breaking the cycle” of abusive supervision. As Berger (as stated in Boyle, 2016) keenly observed, the influence flowing through the trickle-down process can be thought of like a magnet: Prior research has demonstrated its attracting and compelling individuals to do the same thing as leaders, but no research has investigated any tendency for it to “repel” individuals toward the opposite behavior. By identifying disidentification and moral identity as mechanisms by which trickle-down tendencies can “change course,” our study sheds light not only on how social influence attracts, but also when and why it repels. As such, we hope our results encourage continued investigations of the trickle-down process and ways to prevent the spread of abusive behavior.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Scenario Manipulations, Study 1

Imagine you work in a supervisory position at one of the cafés at a local university. The cafés are located throughout the campus in academic buildings. You have had this position for the past two years. The cafés are places where students, faculty, and administrators can grab a quick bite to eat, get something to drink, or simply meet and chat. Your duties include overseeing employees who serve customers food and drinks (coffee, soup, sandwiches, etc.) and collect payment for these items. Your café has a suggestions-award program. The café encourages its employees to submit suggestions to improve its procedures.

Currently, your café maintains a separate office where it stores the materials it needs to serve its customers (coffee cups, soup bowls, napkins, etc.). Recently, you submitted to your general manager a suggestion that may reduce the current level of supplies on hand in your café. Specifically, you recommended that the department adopt a just-in-time delivery schedule for its inventory. Your suggestion could save your business a lot of money by cutting the cost of maintaining inventory. You went out of your way and checked with suppliers and were assured by them that they could supply the necessary materials to the café within 48 hr of an order.

Your boss holds a short meeting to discuss the suggestions-award program at the largest café on campus, which is next to his office. All the supervisors of the other cafés on campus are present. Upon reading your suggestions, your boss becomes angry. In front of your colleagues (supervisors of other cafés on campus) and visibly upset, he criticizes you sternly. He says,

“I just looked at the recommendation you want me to send to my superiors. I don’t know what you’re thinking! If I send this suggestion to my bosses, it will make me look bad in front of them. People in this organization expect general managers to think of these types of things and not a simple shift supervisor.”

You try to make a comment, but the boss cuts you off. He says,

“If you have any future suggestions on how to improve the café, KEEP THEM TO YOURSELF! Nobody wants to hear them. If you keep bothering me, you may lose your job.”

You again try to make your point, as a large group of people begin to enter the café for the lunchtime rush, but again are interrupted. Your boss says,

“STOP TRYING TO ACT LIKE A GENERAL MANAGER AND FOCUS ON YOUR OWN JOB! NOW GET BACK TO WORK!”

Two weeks after your “conversation” with your boss, you learn that he has taken your idea and presented it to his superiors as his own. Your boss is now receiving praise from his superiors regarding his bright ideas and contribution to the café and the university. You learn that the idea will save the café thousands of dollars per month.

Your boss holds a short meeting to discuss the suggestions-award program at the largest café on campus, which is next to his office. All the supervisors of the other cafés on campus are present. Upon reading your suggestions, your boss becomes interested. In front of your colleagues (supervisors of other cafés on campus) and visibly in thought, he says, "I just looked at the recommendation you want me to send to my superiors. I believe I understand the suggestion. I've also been trying to think about ways to improve the café. I will send this suggestion to my supervisors and let you know what they say."

He goes on,

"If you have any other suggestions on how to improve the café, just let me know. Management would like to hear them, so I'll pass them up the chain."

You try to make a point, but a large group of people begin to enter the café for the lunchtime rush. You, your boss, and the other supervisors realize you all have to get back to work. Your boss says,

"Please continue to focus on your job and how it affects the café. Thanks for your suggestions. I'll let you get back to work now."

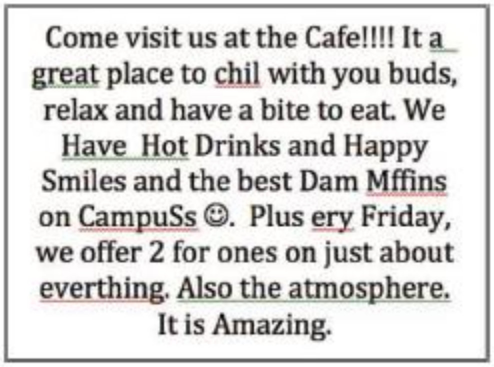
Two weeks after your "conversation" with your boss, you learn that he has presented your idea to his superiors. You learn that your idea has been approved for implementation and that the idea will save the café thousands of dollars per month.

Later, back in the café, your employees have been talking about their suggestions for improving the café. When some of them ask you about the suggestions-award program, and how ideas are received by upper management, you are proud that you are absolutely nothing like your general manager. In fact, you do not share any of his values. Rather, you tell your employees that your values are in direct opposition to those of your general manager and you distance yourself from your boss, his ideas, and his actions as often as possible.

Later, back in the café, your employees have been talking about their suggestions for improving the café. When some of them ask you about the suggestions-award program, and how ideas are received by upper management, you simply describe the guidelines of the program as they were explained to you. You assure them that you just pass the ideas along to the general manager, who then behaves as he sees fit.

APPENDIX B: Advertisement Sent by Subordinate, Study 1

Figure B1. The advertisement participants saw in Study 1. The ad contained green and red lines indicating grammatical and spelling errors, as commonly seen in Microsoft Word, to make these errors obvious to participants. Red = dark gray; green = light gray.



Come visit us at the Cafe!!!! It a
great place to chil with you buds,
relax and have a bite to eat. We
Have Hot Drinks and Happy
Smiles and the best Dam Mffins
on CampuSs ☺. Plus ery Friday,
we offer 2 for ones on just about
everthing. Also the atmosphere.
It is Amazing.

APPENDIX C: Scenario Manipulations, Study 2

Imagine you are the leader of a critical four-member task force in your organization. The task force is struggling to meet deadlines and progress is slow. Tuesday morning, you come in for work and receive the following e-mail from J.P., your boss, addressed to you. The entire task force is copied on this e-mail.

From: J. P.

To: You (with a copy to the entire task force)

Subject: Task Force Progress

Sent: Yesterday afternoon

I realize you've been working hard over the past few weeks. I know it hasn't been a productive time for your team, and progress has been slow toward our upcoming deadline. From what I've observed, your leadership has been pretty lousy and the ideas you've contributed have been stupid. I have informed you about this before. I question the value you add to the team and your ability to lead the team to deliver quality work—do not fail, okay?

—J. P.

From: J. P.

To: You (with a copy to the entire task force)

Subject: Task Force Progress

Sent: Yesterday afternoon

Good morning,

I realize you've been working hard over the past few weeks. I know it hasn't been a productive time for your team, and progress has been slow toward our upcoming deadline. Nonetheless, from what I've observed, your leadership has contributed a lot to the team effort, and I can see the many ways you influence the team's outcome. I have informed you about this before. I'm looking forward to how this whole thing will turn out for you and the team.

—J. P.