Whatever it takes: Leaders’ perceptions of abusive supervision instrumentality

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine how leaders’ perceptions of the instrumental benefits of abusive supervision shape their tendencies to abuse their employees. We posit that leaders who believe abuse has a positive impact on employee performance will engage in more abusive supervision than their peers, with downstream implications for employees’ counterproductive work behaviors. Furthermore, we position leader empathic concern as a boundary condition, whereby empathic concern mitigates the effects of leaders’ perceptions of abusive supervision’s instrumentality. Data from two studies employing both experimental and field survey designs offer convergent support for our hypotheses. Overall, our findings challenge the prevailing view that abusive supervision is primarily motivated by a desire to aggress, instead demonstrating that leaders sometimes abuse their employees in the pursuit of more pro-organizational goals.

Introduction

Abusive supervision is defined as the “sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2006: 178). Since its introduction to organizational research almost twenty years ago, abusive supervision has been shown to harm employee outcomes in myriad ways, with negative implications for employee attitudes (Bowling & Michel, 2011; Breaux, Perrewé, Hall, Frink, & Hochwarter, 2008), performance (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008), well-being (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012), and counterproductive behavior (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2012; Tepper et al., 2009). The literature has progressed to where meta-analytic evidence now robustly signifies abusive supervision’s toxicity (Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Given the many detrimental consequences of abusive supervision, researchers have begun to seek a deeper understanding of the factors that prompt leaders to abuse their employees. Several answers have been proposed. Some have argued that abusive supervision is a form of displaced aggression—a response to leaders’ own experiences of mistreatment within their organizations (Hoober & Brass, 2006; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). As an alternative perspective, abusive supervision has been theorized as unintentional, emerging when leaders become depleted (Yam, Fehr, Keng-Highberger, Klotz, & Reynolds, 2015). Others have argued that leaders abuse certain employees because they see those employees as undeserving of fair treatment (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011). A common theme in such explanations is that abusive supervision is driven by a proximal desire to aggress, either due to negative feelings about the employee or a lack of restraint. However, we suggest that there are times when leaders abuse their employees for instrumental reasons. Specifically, we argue that leaders sometimes engage in abusive supervision in an effort to improve their employees’ performance. In this sense we offer a novel conceptualization of abusive supervision’s root causes, arguing that leaders may sometimes abuse their employees for pro-organizational reasons.

As leadership scholars have long noted, leaders differ in both their goals (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991) and in their perceptions of the most effective ways to meet those goals (Bass, 1998; House, 1971; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008). For example, leaders differ in the extent to which they desire to influence others (Chan & Dragow, 2001; Maurer & Lipstreu, 2005), and in their perceptions of the most effective paths to such influence (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). Hinting at the notion that some leaders might use abusive supervision in an effort to ensure that employees meet their performance expectations, abusive supervision has been depicted as a behavior that is motivated by a desire to “elicit high performance” from employees (Tepper, 2007, p. 265). Yet, the small amount of research conducted regarding the utility of abusive supervision has centered on how abuse is used to punish underachievers (Tepper et al., 2011; Walter, Lam, Van der Vegte, Huang, 2012). A common theme in such explanations is that abusive supervision is driven by a proximal desire to aggress, either due to negative feelings about the employee or a lack of restraint. However, we suggest that there are times when leaders abuse their employees for instrumental reasons. Specifically, we argue that leaders sometimes engage in abusive supervision in an effort to improve their employees’ performance. In this sense we offer a novel conceptualization of abusive supervision’s root causes, arguing that leaders may sometimes abuse their employees for pro-organizational reasons.

However, we suggest that there are times when leaders abuse their employees for instrumental reasons. Specifically, we argue that leaders sometimes engage in abusive supervision in an effort to improve their employees’ performance. In this sense we offer a novel conceptualization of abusive supervision’s root causes, arguing that leaders may sometimes abuse their employees for pro-organizational reasons.

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In this paper, we adopt an instrumental perspective of abusive supervision by drawing from research on lay beliefs. Lay beliefs are advanced knowledge structures that contain causal information (Sedikides & Anderson, 1992). These beliefs guide individuals as they seek to make sense of their surroundings (Levy, Chiu, & Hong, 2006), ultimately influencing their behavior in a wide array of realms. For example, in one paper, Job, Dweck, and Walton (2010) demonstrated that people possess different lay beliefs about the limited nature of willpower, which directly influence their feelings of depletion following the exertion of self-control. In another paper, Detert and Edmondson (2011) explored employees’ lay beliefs about voice. Among their findings, the authors demonstrated that when employees possess a lay belief that speaking up leads to leader embarrassment, they speak up less than their peers.

Turning to lay beliefs about abusive supervision, we hypothesize that leaders differ in their perceptions of abusive supervision as an instrumental form of leadership. In other words, leaders differ in the extent to which they believe that abusive supervision improves employee performance (hereafter referred to as “instrumentality beliefs”). Leaders are naturally concerned about employee performance because of how it is linked to personal and organizational objectives, targets, and goals. If a leader believes that yelling at an employee will elicit higher performance from him or her, then the leader has an incentive to yell. We argue that because leaders are accountable for employee performance, leaders possessing strong instrumentality beliefs will be motivated to engage in abusive supervision (Locke & Latham, 1984).

Although leaders with instrumentality beliefs may abuse employees for pro-organizational reasons (i.e., to improve employee performance), we posit that the abuse that stems from these beliefs will nonetheless exact a cost on the organization. Specifically, we posit that leaders’ instrumentality beliefs will increase employees’ tendencies to engage in counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), mediated by abusive supervision. Establishing this mediated chain is important because it influences their feelings of depletion following the exertion of self-control. In a third line of reasoning, Tepper et al. (2011) theorized that supervisors target their employees because they are motivated, they in practice impose substantial costs to organizations in the form of employee CWBs, which have been shown to impose hefty organizational costs and harm business unit performance (Bourke, 1994; Dunlop & Lee, 2004; Harris & Ogbonna, 2002).

Whereas we expect leaders with strong instrumentality beliefs to engage in abusive supervision more frequently than their peers, we also recognize that boundary conditions of this effect are likely. Most notably, we argue that leaders might not act on their instrumentality beliefs when abuse contradicts leaders’ levels of concern for their employees’ well-being. On the one hand, some leaders consider the well-being and satisfaction of their employees to be an important component of the leader role (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). On the other hand, other leaders are more disposed to self-interest and are consequently less attentive to their employees’ well-being (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Briefly stated, we argue that leaders are less likely to act on their instrumentality beliefs when their regard for their employees’ well-being is high.

To capture such differences in regard for others’ well-being, we focus on empathic concern—an individual difference constituting “feelings of sympathy and concern for unfortunate others” (Davis, 1983, p. 114). When individuals are high on empathic concern, they tend to experience negative emotions when witnessing or causing distress in others. In contrast, low levels of empathic concern connote relatively little distress at the suffering of others. Building on this literature, we theorize that high levels of empathic concern will reduce leaders’ tendencies to act on their instrumentality beliefs (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002).

In sum, we hypothesize a moderated mediation model, wherein instrumentality beliefs have an indirect effect on CWBs via abusive supervision, moderated by empathic concern. Our research makes three interrelated contributions to existing theory. First, we contribute to the abusive supervision literature by shifting toward a more instrumental approach, arguing that leaders often abuse their employees with the organization’s best interests in mind. Second, we contribute to the leadership literature by highlighting the importance of leaders’ lay beliefs about what it takes to improve employee performance for downstream employee behavior. Finally, we contribute to the leadership literature by demonstrating that the choice to act on instrumentality beliefs hinges on a leader’s concern for others. Specifically, we highlight how instrumentality beliefs do not operate independently, but rather within the context of a leader’s overarching goals and values. Our overall model is depicted in Fig. 1.

Theory and hypotheses

Why do leaders abuse their employees?

Scholars have adopted several related perspectives on why leaders abuse their employees (Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013). One primary line of reasoning suggests that abusive supervision is a result of displaced aggression. Leaders experience organizational injustice, and then “take it out” on their employees (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Rafferty, Restubog, & Jimmieson, 2010; Tepper et al., 2006). This depiction aligns with the description of abusive supervision as aggression “directed against convenient and innocent targets when retaliation against the source of one's frustration is not possible or feasible” (Tepper, 2007, p. 269). Researchers have theorized that supervisors target their employees because they are “safe” to abuse, in contrast to their own leaders or the organization itself, as directing aggression toward these targets might evoke further mistreatment (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper et al., 2006).

Abusive supervision has also been explained by way of stress and self-control frameworks. Under these frameworks, scholars argue that leaders succumb to abusive supervision temptations when stress is high and self-control resources are low. For example, Burton, Hoobler, and Scheuer (2012) found a positive association between leader-reported stress and employee-rated abusive supervision. Drawing from ego-depletion theory, Yam et al. (2015) demonstrated that surface acting depletes leaders, thereby leading to abusive supervision. Similarly, Barnes, Lucianetti, Bhave, and Christian (2015) showed that poor sleep quality predicted next-day ego depletion, and that leaders were more likely to abuse their employees when depleted.

In a third line of reasoning, Tepper et al. (2011) theorized that leaders are most likely to abuse employees whom they perceive as...
undeserving of fair treatment. Drawing from moral exclusion theory, these scholars theorized that leaders maintain a scope of justice (Opotow, 1995), but that dissimilar employees fall outside of this scope and are “morally excluded,” or seen as undeserving of justice. This perspective suggests that supervisors demonstrate favoritism toward similar employees and derogation (i.e., abuse) toward dissimilar employees, providing logic as to why a leader would abuse one employee but not another. Mitchell, Vogel, and Folger (2015) demonstrated that even neutral third parties morally exclude targets of abuse when the targeted employee is judged as being “deserving” of the abusive behavior.

Additionally, abusive supervision has been explained by way of social learning theory. According to the tenets of social learning theory, individuals learn how to respond to contextual stimuli by emulating the behavior of role models (Bandura, 1986). Turning to the context of abusive supervision, social learning theory suggests that if a mid-level leader observes a senior leader abusing the organization’s employees, the mid-level leader will infer that abuse is a normatively appropriate and desirable way to lead in the organization, and thus act in kind. Indeed, research has demonstrated consistent support for this “trickle-down process” of abuse in organizations (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012; Mawritz, Mayer, Hoober, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009), providing convincing evidence for how abuse spreads throughout an organization.

Finally, research suggests that personality predicts abusive supervision—some leaders are more naturally prone than others to abuse their employees. Leadership research in general has long considered leader personality to be an influential predictor of leader behavior (De Vries, 2012; DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Ilies, 2009), including destructive behavior (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Krasikova, Green, & Le Breton, 2013; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Recently, research has elucidated the role of personality in abusive supervision. On the one hand, leaders who are agreeable, honest, and humble abuse their employees to a lesser extent (Breevaart & de Vries, 2017). On the other hand, leaders who are aggressive, skeptical, and Machiavellian are more likely to engage in abusive supervision (Kiazid, Restubog, Zagenczyk, & Kiewitz, 2010; Krasikova et al., 2013). Leaders are therefore more or less disposed to engage in abusive supervision as a function of the leader’s personality.

Although these predominant perspectives on abusive supervision offer highly useful accounts of leader abuse, we suggest that the current picture remains incomplete. Whereas the current literature would suggest that abusive supervision is an end in itself and primarily motivated by a direct desire to aggress against a particular employee, we posit that some leaders use abuse as a means to an end and are instead motivated by more pro-organizational goals. Specifically, we suggest that leaders sometimes abuse their employees to achieve the more distal goal of improving employee performance.

An instrumental approach

There are many anecdotal examples of leaders who have behaved abusively in order to improve performance. A popular example of one such leader is basketball coach Bob Knight, who famously abused his players in an effort to win more games. By his own account, Knight (2013, p. 3) would hang posters in the locker room with phrases such as “Victory favors the team making the fewest mistakes” and would discourage mistakes through abusive behavior such as yelling directly into players’ faces and heaving chairs onto the court. It is important to note that Knight considered his disparaging methods to be the best way to win basketball games (Knight, 2013), which suggests that his behavior was deliberate and instrumental. Knight’s high powered position all but precludes him from being considered a victim of organizational injustice or a follower of a senior leader’s leadership approach, and his consistent methods across time and players indicate that his abuse was something more than temporary ego depletion or targeted moral exclusion.

Similar iconic examples of leaders in the business world who attempted to use abuse as a path to improved performance include Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos. Steve Jobs was known to consistently scold employees who didn’t meet his expectations. For example, when Apple’s MobileMe service experienced several setbacks, Jobs publicly reprimanded the development team for thirty minutes, using expletives and humiliation to make his point (Lashinsky, 2011). Jeff Bezos has also been known to publicly revile others, with phrases such as, “I’m sorry, did I take my stupid pills today?” often leaving employees crying at their desks (Stone, 2013). Many employees who have worked with these leaders consider their tactics as calculated and intentional (Isaacson, 2011; Stone, 2013).

Because Jobs and Bezos occupied extremely high-powered positions, it is unlikely that their abusive supervision was due to organizational injustice and social learning. Furthermore, their abuse was reportedly consistent across time and individuals, thereby ruling out causal arguments focused on ego depletion and moral exclusion. We argue that these leaders likely abused their employees due to strong beliefs that the abuse would directly improve the employees’ performance. This perspective is succinctly articulated by Terence Fletcher, a jazz instructor in the movie Whiplash, when he said, “There are no two words in the English language more harmful than ‘good job.’” Simply put, some leaders seem to firmly believe that abusive supervision is an effective, instrumental approach to leadership.

Leadership research has typically approached leadership beliefs from a social categorization perspective. Research on implicit leadership theories states that employees maintain schemas that specify traits and abilities that are prototypical of leaders (Foti & Lord, 1987; Larson, 1982; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991). Through this lens, employees are categorized as leaders and non-leaders based on the match between their characteristics and the schema of the observer (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Employees use these lay beliefs to understand and respond to leaders (Shondrick & Lord, 2010). For example, an individual who demonstrates dynamism and intelligence is likely to be categorized as a leader and to be treated like a leader. These lay beliefs are also influential in terms of a match to the prototype—leaders who more closely match an employee’s lay beliefs of leadership are more likely be thought of as effective. In support of this notion, employees experience greater organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and well-being when their leaders match their lay beliefs, due in part to heightened leader-member exchange quality (Engle & Lord, 1997; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005).

Implicit leadership theory has predominantly focused on perceptual, attributional processes that are enlisted to determine who is a leader, or how effective a leader is (Alabdulhadi, Schyns, & Staudigl, 2017; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Junker & van Dick, 2014; Shondrick, Dinh, & Lord, 2010). One common criticism of implicit leadership theories research is that most studies focus on lay beliefs about the traits of a prototypical leader to the neglect of the other ways lay beliefs may influence perceptions and workplace outcomes (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tam-Quon, & Topakas, 2013). As noted by Lord and Maher, “[L]eader behavior may be explained by the implicit theories that help a leader interpret a situation and generate appropriate responses” (1991, p. 5). As such, leaders may have lay beliefs about leader behaviors that speak to how a leader should act. It is on this theoretical premise that we build from and posit that instrumentality beliefs influence abusive supervisory action tendencies.

How do these instrumentality beliefs operate? Past research suggests that lay beliefs play a central role in sensemaking processes, facilitating predictions about cause and effect (Levy et al., 2006; Weick, 1995). Put differently, lay beliefs act as a heuristic, non-consciously informing individuals about how to respond to stimuli vis-à-vis their respective existing knowledge structures. Unlike scientific theories, lay beliefs often reflect an inaccurate view of the world, creating a
disconnect between perception and reality (Levy et al., 2006; Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2013). The perception that men are more effective leaders than women is an example of a lay belief that persists despite scientific evidence to the contrary (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Lobel & St. Clair, 1992). Lay beliefs develop via both direct and indirect experiences (Abelson, 1976; Anderson & Lindsay, 1998) and involve both trial-and-error (direct experience) and vicarious learning (indirect experience; Manz & Sims, 1981). In the case of instrumentality beliefs, a leader might develop the belief that abuse is an effective path to employee performance via early career experiences with his or her own superiors. Consistent with the romance of leadership perspective (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985), an early-career employee might attribute an organization's success to the leader's abusive style, even if the success occurred in spite of the abusive supervision. More indirectly, examples of leaders that are simultaneously "successful" and "abusive" (e.g., Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos) abound, which could be theorized to promote instrumentality beliefs among observers. Such an attribution might be especially likely to the extent that the negative effects of abuse, such as employee distress, are hidden from the casual observer. In short, leaders can be theorized to develop instrumentality beliefs from myriad experiences, both direct and indirect. The effects of lay beliefs on cognition and behavior often evade conscious awareness. Nevertheless, evidence shows that lay beliefs consistently impact the way people think and act. For example, lay beliefs predict the propensity to endorse stereotypes (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998), influence self-esteem in response to failure (Niiya, Crocker, & Barmess, 2004), and determine managers' propensities to coach their employees (Heslin, Vandewalle, & Latham, 2006). Theory suggests that individuals possess content awareness of their lay beliefs, being able to articulate one's beliefs about a target, yet often lack impact awareness—the sense of how a lay belief influences one's action tendencies and impacts others (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Extending this logic to abusive supervision, leaders are more likely aware of their instrumentality beliefs while being less aware of how these beliefs influence their own behavior and impact others. Leaders have a vested interest in their employees' performance and may even have goals tied to specific levels of employee output. When this is the case, leaders with strong instrumentality beliefs should be motivated to abuse their employees because they believe that doing so will help them achieve their goals. And according to theory on lay beliefs, the adverse effects of abusive supervision may not be salient enough to deter leaders from abusive behavior (cf. Levy et al., 2006; Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

Two studies in the existing literature offer indirect support for our theorizing. In the first, Walter et al. (2015) demonstrated that leaders are particularly likely to abuse low performers, suggesting that leaders are both sensitive to employee underperformance and often view abuse as a legitimate response. In the second, Khan, Moss, Quratulain, and Hameed (2016) more generally demonstrated that leaders who are concerned about employee performance tend to abuse their employees. Whereas these studies offer preliminary evidence for a meaningful link between employee performance and leader abuse, they nevertheless align with the consensus in the literature that leaders consider abuse as harmful, rather than as pro-organizational. In other words, the role of instrumentality beliefs remains unestablished, and we posit that such beliefs have a significant bearing on leader abusive supervision.

**Hypothesis 1.** Instrumentality beliefs are positively associated with abusive supervision.

**The moderating role of leader concern for others**

Although we argue that leaders' instrumentality beliefs are likely to impact their propensity to engage in abusive supervision, we do not suggest that all leaders will be equally impacted by these beliefs. Beyond employee performance, leaders differ in the goals they set for themselves and their employees. Many leaders, for instance, perceive employee career development to be a central part of the leader role (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Liden et al., 2008; Stogdill, 1950). Due to the innate tension between abuse and employee well-being, we argue that leaders with strong instrumentality beliefs should be conflicted to the degree that they prioritize employee welfare. Indeed, these leaders may find themselves having to choose between two mutually exclusive priorities: improving employee performance (i.e., engaging in abuse) and improving employee well-being (i.e., refraining from abuse). Conversely, leaders who do not prioritize employee welfare (e.g., Bob Knight) should not experience such conflict and should therefore be more likely to act on their instrumentality beliefs.

To examine the notion of leaders' interest in their employees' well-being, we focus on the construct of empathic concern. Empathic concern is a dispositional trait that refers to an individual's level of sympathy for others (Davis, 1983). Affective in nature, empathic concern entails a tendency to respond with empathic emotions to the misfortunes of other people (Allen, Facteau, & Facteau, 2004; Spector & Fox, 2002). Scholars have theorized that empathic concern arouses altruistic motivation to relieve the distress of others (Dovidio, Allen, & Schroeder, 1990), and that the experience of empathy leads to prosocial behaviors such as helping (Batson, Ekliund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007; Stürmer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005).

Within organizations, scholars have implicated empathic concern as a meaningful construct. For example, research has consistently provided evidence that empathic individuals carry out more organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs; Penner, 2002; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Rioux & Penner, 2001). Indeed, a review of personality and OCB literatures reported a meta-analytic correlation of 0.28 between OCBs and other-oriented empathy (Borman et al., 2001). Related to leadership, Patiño and Skarlicki (2010) found that empathic leaders were more likely to be perceived as interpersonally just. Kellett, Humphrey, and Sleeth (2006) found that empathy garners higher task and relations leadership ratings from others. The evidence from this research indicates that empathic concern is germane to discussions of leadership and of significant import to organizations. Consistent with Nezlek, Feist, Wilson, and Plesko (2001), we conceptualize empathy as a stable individual difference.

In our current framework, we argue that empathy mitigates the influence of instrumentality beliefs on abusive supervision. One pertinent component of empathy is experience sharing, which is the propensity to adopt the sensory, motor, visceral, and affective states of others (cf. Levy et al., 2006; Lewandowsky et al., 2013). Indirect evidence provides some support for this notion, as other researchers have theorized that empathy involves the ability to understand and share the feelings of others (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Zaki, 2014). Thus, prior to influencing one's behavior, empathy influences one's awareness of the psychological and emotional states of others. Applying this logic to our model, an empathic leader is more likely to be aware of and care about his or her employees' affective states and well-being. Since abusive supervision predominantly results in detrimental affective outcomes (e.g., Arye et al., 2008; Breaux et al., 2008; Carlson, Ferguson, Huner, & Whitten, 2012; Wu & Hu, 2009), employees discomf ort resulting from abusive supervision is more likely to be co-experienced by empathic leaders compared to non-empathic leaders. Therefore, even though an empathic leader may believe that abuse elicits high performance, s/he will nevertheless be discouraged from engaging in abuse due to the looming affective consequences which will ensue as a result of the abuse.

Indirect evidence provides some support for this notion, as other organizational research has positioned empathic concern as a moderator of employees' responses to their workplace experiences. For example, Kammad, McAllister, and Turban (2006) found that low procedural justice predicted fewer OCBs—except for highly empathic employees. The authors theorized that empathic employees broaden their OCB definition regardless of whether they are treated in a procedurally unfair way; thus, empathic concern buffers the negative effects of procedural injustice. In another example, Batanova and Loukas (2011) posited empathic concern as a boundary condition to relational aggression—individuals with empathic concern refrained from
retaliation, despite being enticed to do so. Similarly, Lelieveld, Van Dijk, Van Beest, and Van Kleef (2012) provided evidence that empathic individuals were less likely to punish offenders in response to distributive injustice due to a directed focus on the misfortune of a victim. These studies demonstrate how empathic concern causes individuals to be concerned about the harm caused to others, which deters them from acting aggressively toward others even when inclined to do so.

**Hypothesis 2.** The relationship between instrumentality beliefs and abusive supervision is moderated by empathic concern, such that the relationship is weaker among leaders high in empathic concern.

**Implications for employee counterproductive work behavior**

A main objective of the current research is to demonstrate the gravity of instrumentality beliefs by demonstrating their implications for employees and organizations. Theory on abusive supervision would suggest that one of the most damaging prototypical consequences of abuse is employee CWB. CWB describes voluntary deviations from the organization's norms and expectations for appropriate behavior and range from loafing and rudeness to theft and absenteeism (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Martinko, Gundlach, & Douglas, 2002). CWBs are conceptualized as intentional acts that threaten the well-being of an organization or its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995) and have been shown to damage organizational functioning (Bourke, 1994; Dunlop & Lee, 2004; Harris & Ogbonna, 2002).

Several arguments have been offered in support of a link between abusive supervision and CWBs. First, employees who fall victim to abusive supervision are motivated to “get back” at offenders by way of retaliatory behaviors (Gouldner, 1966; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008). Under the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1966), wrongful treatment from a leader breeds wrongful behavior from employees. Second, a self-determination theory perspective states that when employees experience abuse, their basic needs are thwarted, which essentially robs employees of the cognitive and emotional resources needed to self-regulate their behavior to act rationally (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lian et al., 2012). Without the resources required to behave appropriately, employees succumb to engaging in irrational behavior (i.e., CWBs). And third, social information processing theory has been implicated to explain how a hostile climate leads to employee CWBs in response to abusive supervision by way of a normatively appropriate coping strategy (Mawritz et al., 2012; Mawritz, Dust, & Resick, 2014; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Employees become frustrated by being treated poorly, and as encouraged by the social-normative cues of the work environment, vent their negative emotions by engaging in CWBs.

The association between abusive supervision and CWBs has held across a number of contexts. For instance, scholars have found empirical support for this link with samples that consisted of individuals across a wide array of industries (e.g., Burton & Hooijer, 2011; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Dupré, Inness, Connelly, Barling, and Hopton (2006) demonstrated that this link holds for younger workers, as teenage part-time employees followed the same patterns of reactive behavior. Retaliation in response to aggression has been demonstrated in both field (e.g., Thau & Mitchell, 2010) and laboratory settings (e.g., Mitchell & Ambrose, 2012). Most recently, a meta-analysis by Mackey et al. (2017) confirmed the abuse – retaliatory deviance link.

Although scholars have established a direct link between abusive supervision and employee CWBs, the indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on CWBs via abusive supervision has yet to be assessed. Although we assert that leaders abuse because of lay beliefs independent of their desire to aggress, we posit that employee aggression is likely regardless of the beliefs and motives maintained by leaders. If instrumentality beliefs do indirectly predict CWBs, it would suggest that even beliefs about abusive supervision are meaningful—a notion that we consider to be an extension of current theory. We test this claim by hypothesizing employee CWBs as a downstream implication of leaders' instrumental beliefs. We aim to emphasize the breadth of implications of these beliefs for leaders, employees, and their organizations.

**Hypothesis 3a.** There is an indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on employee counterproductive work behaviors via abusive supervision.

**Hypothesis 3b.** The indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on employee counterproductive work behaviors via abusive supervision is moderated by empathic concern, such that the indirect relationship is weaker among leaders high in empathic concern.

**Research overview**

We conducted two studies to test our theoretical model. We employed an experimental design in Study 1 in order to test whether leader instrumentality beliefs influence the propensity to engage in abusive supervision and to test the boundary condition of empathic concern. In Study 2, we tested our full theoretical model by gathering field data from leader-employee dyads working in China. Together, these studies support the predictive role of instrumentality beliefs and the theoretical relevance of our model.

**Study 1**

**Participants and procedure**

We recruited 100 full-time working adults from the online survey platform Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2012; for recent examples of organizational scholars utilizing this method of data collection see Harmon, Kim, & Mayer, 2015; Kilduff, Galinsky, Gallo, & Reade, 2016; Leavitt, Barnes, Watkins, & Wagner, 2017; Yam, Fehr, & Barnes, 2014). We constrained our sample to those who currently supervise employees, and to those with at least a 95% Mechanical Turk participant approval rating. After screening out participants who did not meet our screening requirements or who failed an attention check, we retained 81 participants (Mage = 36.01 years, 58% male; 76% European American). Participants reported an average of 16.40 years (SD = 11.03) of work experience and 7.49 years (SD = 6.30) of supervisory experience.

We conducted a between-subjects experiment by randomly assigning participants to one of two experimental conditions (instrumentality beliefs vs. control). Participants in the instrumentality beliefs condition were presented with the instrumentality beliefs manipulation (see Appendix A), whereas participants in the control condition were not presented with any information about the instrumentality of abuse. All participants were then presented with a managerial situation where they were about to hire a new employee (Jordan) and were asked to write a few sentences about their managerial role and what they would do (see Appendix B). Participants subsequently completed a survey asking them about their likelihood of engaging in abusive supervision with the new employee, reported their trait-level empathic concern, completed a manipulation check, and answered demographic-based questions. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for Study 1.

**Table 1**

**Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 1).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Abusive supervision</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Instrumentality beliefs manipulation^a</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.32^c</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Empathic concern</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>−0.53^c</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 81.*

^a 1 = “High Instrumentality Beliefs,” 0 = “Low Instrumentality Beliefs.”
^b p < .01.
Manipulations and measures

Instrumentality beliefs manipulation

We manipulated instrumentality beliefs with information regarding abusive supervision (see Appendix A). In the instrumentality beliefs condition, participants were presented with several prototypical abusive supervision behaviors from the Tepper (2000) abusive supervision scale (e.g., remind an employee of past mistakes and failures, giving them the silent treatment), with accompanying logic that such behaviors can increase employee performance. We additionally presented cases of successful leaders (i.e., Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos) who were known to engage in “strong leadership.” We then asked participants to write how and when a leader might improve employee performance by engaging in abuse. In the control condition, participants were not presented with any information about abusive supervision, nor did they write about abusive supervision instrumentalism. Instead, participants were immediately presented with the managerial scenario (see Appendix B).

Abusive supervision

In the current study, we asked how likely the participant would be to engage in abusive behaviors. Such hypothetical questioning is typical among aggression researchers utilizing situation-based experiments (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2009). Whereas observational studies are presented with the challenge of holding context constant, situation-based experiments allow researchers to examine context-specific relationships. Furthermore, situation-based experiments allow for a high degree of internal validity compared to other research designs (Cook, Campbell, & Day, 1979). In the current study, participants were asked, “How likely would you be to engage in the following behaviors with Jordan?” and were presented with 15 items that were adapted from the traditional abusive supervision scale (Tepper, 2000). Example items include, “Remind him of his past mistakes and failures,” “Tell him he’s incompetent,” and “Give him the silent treatment” (I = extremely unlikely; 7 = extremely likely; α = 0.96).

Empathic concern

We measured empathic concern with the empathic concern subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), which has previously been employed in organizational research (e.g., Joo, Kamdar, Daniels, & Duell, 2006; Kamdar et al., 2006) The scale consists of 7 items which include “I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person,” “I am often quite touched by things that I see happen,” and “Other people’s misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal” (reverse-coded). Participants self-rated their empathic concern by indicating their agreement for the 7 items (I = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; α = 0.87).

Instrumentality beliefs manipulation check

At the end of the study, participants were asked to indicate which response characterized the sentences they wrote regarding “strong leadership” (I = 1 wrote about how strong leadership sometimes improves employee performance; 2 = I didn’t write about strong leadership). A chi-square test of independence of categorical variables indicated that the instrumentality beliefs manipulation had an effect on the manipulation check (χ²(1) = 6.40, p < .05), signifying a successful manipulation.

Results and discussion

Hypothesis 1 predicts that instrumentality beliefs are positively associated with abusive supervision. In support of Hypothesis 1, instrumentality beliefs significantly predicted abusive supervision (b = 0.71, SE = 0.21, p < .01, ΔR² = 0.37). This finding in the context of our experiment suggests that instrumentality beliefs predict abusive supervision and that instrumentality beliefs are malleable. We tested Hypothesis 2 by examining whether trait empathic concern attenuated the effect of instrumentality beliefs on abusive supervision. We created an interaction term by multiplying the predictor variables after centering them. The coefficient for the interaction term was significant (b = −0.54, SE = 0.20, p < .01, ΔR² = 0.05; see Table 2 and Fig. 2).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentality beliefs manipulation</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic concern</td>
<td>−0.58</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentality beliefs × empathic concern</td>
<td>−0.54</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 81.

* 1 = “High Instrumentality Beliefs,” 0 = “Low Instrumentality Beliefs.” ** p < .01.

Hypothesis 2 is therefore supported.

Study 1 has several strengths. Our random assignment of participants to condition diffuses concerns of individual- or situation-based differences regarding instrumentality beliefs (Cook et al., 1979). Removing these differences is critical since much abusive supervision is ascribed to personality and aggressive situations (Breevaart & de Vries, 2017; De Vries, 2012; Hoo-bl er & Brass, 2006; Johnson, Vernon, & Feiler, 2008; Johnson, Vernon, Harris, & Jang, 2004; Tepper et al., 2006). Additionally, the ordering of our manipulation and outcome evidence the temporal precedence required to claim causality. This is important, because research indicates that lay beliefs are developed from direct experience (Abelson, 1976; Anderson & Lindsay, 1998), and without temporal precedence one may infer that instrumentality beliefs stem from abusive behaviors instead of the reverse. However, Study 1 is limited in its generalizability, and it is unclear whether the effects of instrumentality beliefs are strong enough to have an effect on organizational outcomes. We therefore conducted Study 2 in a field setting, examining whether instrumentality beliefs influence employee CWB.

Study 2

Participants and procedure

In Study 2, we aimed to increase the generalizability of our findings and avoid the contextual constraints associated with data collection within a single organization or industry (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). Toward this aim, we collected data from a sample of adults working fulltime and attending a Masters of Business Administration program located in central China. Two hundred and eighteen individuals were invited to participate in the study in exchange for a small monetary incentive (20 Chinese yuan, or about 3 US dollars). Participants were given two options for the survey, depending on their current work position and status. Participants in leadership roles were asked to fill out the leader survey and then deliver the employee survey to one of his/her employees. In order to ensure randomness, these participants were instructed to select the employee whose name most closely resembled a randomly assigned English character. Participants who were
not in leadership roles were instructed to complete the employee survey and to deliver the leader survey to their leader. Both surveys were returned directly to the research team to ensure confidentiality. A total of 176 dyads completed both surveys for a final response rate of 80.7%.

Leaders (M_{age} = 34.77; 61% male) completed measures of their instrumentality beliefs, empathic concern, and demographics. Employees (M_{age} = 28.57; 33% male) completed measures of abusive supervision, CWBs, and demographics. The average relationship tenure for the dyads was 2.97 years. Participants worked in areas including administration (55%), marketing and sales (24%), and research and development (12%).

Measures

Abusive supervision

We measured abusive supervision with the 15-item abusive supervision scale (Tepper, 2000). Employees rated the frequency of their leader engaging in abusive supervision. Example items include, “Ridicules me,” “Tells me I’m incompetent,” and “Is rude to me” (1 = I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me; 5 = He/ she uses this behavior very often with me; α = 0.93).

Instrumentality beliefs

In order to assess leader beliefs regarding the instrumentality of abuse, we instructed leaders to, “Consider a leader who, when interacting with an employee, sometimes…” and then listed the same 15 abusive supervision behaviors described in the preceding paragraph except with a different referent (e.g., “ridicules him/her”). We then adapted and listed the five items used by Liu et al. (2012); we changed the referent behavior to reflect abusive supervision more generally, and we changed the referent target to reflect employees in general. We asked leaders the extent to which they agreed that the listed behaviors: “…elicits high performance from subordinates,” “…send messages that mistakes will not be tolerated,” “…stimulate subordinates to meet performance goals,” “…alert subordinates of their mistakes and problems,” and “…push subordinates to work harder” (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; α = 0.85).

Empathic concern

We assessed empathic concern with the same scale used in Study 1 (Davis, 1983; α = 0.73).

Counterproductive work behaviors

To measure employees’ counterproductive behavior, we utilized the 19-item counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB) scale (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). The CWB scale is composed of interpersonally-directed and organizationally-directed deviant behaviors (CWBi and CWBo, respectively). Past abusive supervision research has provided empirical evidence that both types of deviant behaviors are elicited by abusive supervision (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2012; Tepper et al., 2008). We therefore included all 19 items in our analyses. Employees rated the frequency in which they engage in the 19 behaviors (1 = never; 7 = daily; α = 0.93).

Controls

We included six control variables in our analyses. Employee age and gender have previously been shown to influence leader liking (Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989), so we controlled for these employee characteristics. Relationship tenure can potentially affect leader-employee interactions (Erdogan & Liden, 2002; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001), so we controlled for length of the dyadic relationship by asking leaders how long they have worked with the employee. Because leader age and gender can impact the propensity to use aggression in the workplace (older leaders and female leaders use aggression less frequently; Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999), we controlled for these leader variables. Finally, we controlled for employee task performance to rule it out as a potential alternative explanation. Specifically, past abusive supervision research considering employee performance has suggested that leaders abuse poor performers (Tepper et al., 2011; Walter et al., 2015); however, our theoretical claim suggests that leaders find utility in abuse independent of employee performance levels. Accordingly, leaders completed the seven-item scale by Williams and Anderson (1991) regarding the focal employee. Sample items include, “Adequately completes assigned duties,” and “Performs tasks that are expected of him/her” (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; α = 0.80).

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are presented in Table 3. To test Hypothesis 1, we conducted hierarchical ordinary least square (OLS) regression (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). The results are depicted in Table 4. We entered the six control variables in Step 1, the independent variable (instrumentality beliefs) and moderating variable (empathic concern) in Step 2, and in Step 3 we entered the interaction term that we created by centering the predictor variables and multiplying them. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, instrumentality beliefs significantly predicted abusive supervision above and beyond the control

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1 We also conducted all analyses with no controls and found the same patterns of results. These results are available from the first author upon request.
supervision, (2, the interaction effect of instrumentality beliefs and empathic concern was found to attenuate the indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on CWBs, with empathic concern acting as a moderator. To test this conditional indirect effect, we conducted a post-hoc analysis at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of empathic concern. The test for those low in empathic concern produced a non-significant indirect effect (β = 0.011, 95% CI = [0.005, 0.018]); the test for those high in empathic concern produced a significant indirect effect (β = 0.063, 0.013; 95% CI = [0.016, 0.145]). Furthermore, testing for a conditional indirect effect via the Process macro resulted in Hypothesis 3b being supported. In other words, empathic concern was found to attenuate the indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on CWBs.

In order to test Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we followed recommendations of past researchers (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Hayes, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2004) and utilized a bias-corrected bootstrapping approach (with 10,000 resamples) in order to avoid violating assumptions of normality. Results are depicted in Table 5. Hypothesis 3a predicted an indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on CWBs. Analysis variables (β = 0.06, p < .05, ΔR² = 0.08). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the interaction effect also exhibited a significant effect on abusive supervision, (b = −0.13, p < .001, ΔR² = 0.07). This interactive relationship can be viewed in Fig. 3. We conducted a simple slope analysis at high and low levels of empathic concern. For individuals low in empathic concern, instrumentality beliefs significantly predicted abusive supervision (b = 0.09, SE = 0.03, p < .01). In contrast, for individuals high in empathic concern, instrumentality beliefs failed to predict abusive supervision (b = −0.03, SE = 0.03, p = .32), providing further support of Hypothesis 2.

In order to test Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we followed recommendations of past researchers (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Hayes, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2004) and utilized a bias-corrected bootstrapping approach (with 10,000 resamples) in order to avoid violating assumptions of normality. Results are depicted in Table 5. Hypothesis 3a predicted an indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on CWBs. Analysis provided support for Hypothesis 3a, with a confidence interval that did not span zero (indirect effect = 0.037, SE = 0.021, 95% CI [0.005, 0.090]). Hypothesis 3b posited a conditional indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on CWBs, with empathic concern acting as a first-stage moderator. To test this moderated mediation hypothesis, we ran analysis at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of empathic concern. The test for those low in empathic concern produced a significant indirect effect (indirect effect = 0.068, SE = 0.032, 95% CI = [0.016, 0.145]); meanwhile, the test for those high in empathic concern produced a non-significant indirect effect (indirect effect = −0.016, SE = 0.018, 95% CI = [−0.063, 0.013]). Furthermore, testing for a conditional indirect effect via the Process macro resulted in significance (coefficient = −0.048, SE = 0.022, 95% CI = [−0.10, −0.011]); thus, Hypothesis 3b was supported. In other words, empathic concern was found to attenuate the indirect effect of instrumentality beliefs on CWBs.

Study 2 was conducted in a field setting and therefore offers strong external validity. As hypothesized, instrumentality beliefs were found to be powerful enough to influence employee behavior, and toxic enough to impair organizations. One strength of this study is that it circumvents common method variance because the data were collected from a dyadic pair at different points in time. However, Study 2 is limited in that the data are correlational rather than causal, and the temporal ordering of our variables is less certain. To provide further evidence for our mediational pathway, we conducted a post-hoc
In this paper, we argued for a more instrumental perspective on abusive supervision, wherein leaders aggress not only for its own sake, but also in an effort to achieve the more distal outcome of employee performance. Furthermore, we argued that the effects of leaders' instrumentality beliefs shape employee CWBs, and are bounded by leaders' empathic concern. Thus, although leaders may be motivated by a laudable cause, they nevertheless harm the organization due to employees' increased tendency to act in counterproductive ways. Two studies provided convergent support for our hypotheses. Study 1 employed an experimental design, offering evidence for the causal role of instrumentality beliefs on abusive supervision and for the moderating role of empathic concern. Study 2 in turn offered support for our full model in a field study of matched leader-employee dyads, demonstrating the direct implications of leader instrumentality beliefs for employees' increased tendency to act in counterproductive ways. Our hypotheses were robustly supported across these varied study designs and operationalizations of abusive supervision. One final point regarding our analysis is that abusive supervision exhibited relatively low means (1.77 for Study 1; 1.43 for Study 2) as is typical in abusive supervision research (Mackey et al., 2017). Low-mean variables potentially carry response biases that reduce systematic variance; as such, our results constitute a conservative test of our hypotheses. In all, our findings highlight the importance of a more instrumental perspective on abusive supervision, offering important insights for theory and practice.

Three theoretical contributions are particularly deserving of attention. First, we contribute to research by deepening scholars' understanding of why leaders abuse their employees. In past research, scholars have primarily argued that leaders abuse their employees for retaliatory reasons (Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Tepper et al., 2006), for moral exclusionary reasons (Tepper et al., 2011), due to dispositional traits (Breevaart & de Vries, 2017; Krasikova et al., 2013), due to social learning (Liu et al., 2012), or due to a lack of self-control resources (Byrne et al., 2014; Yam et al., 2015). Although past researchers have implied that abusive supervision may be a managerial method chosen by leaders to "elicit high performance" from employees (Tepper, 2007, p. 265), our research is the first to directly assess the degree to which leaders think abuse does (or does not) increase performance and how this affects behavior. In contrast to previous theorizing, our perspective suggests that some leaders may abuse their employees for ostensibly legitimate purposes. Whereas past research would suggest that performance levels generate abuse from leaders due to moral exclusion (Walter et al., 2015) or due to perceived threat (Khan et al., 2016), this research remains agnostic as to whether leaders consider abuse as a means to an end, or to whether leaders believe that abuse will boost subsequent performance. Our research extends current theory as it evidences that some leaders genuinely believe abusive supervision increases employee performance, and that these beliefs guide abusive behavior. Our perspective corroborates the anecdotal cases of Bob Knight, Steve Jobs, and various others whose abuse is not fully explained by prevailing perspectives. Indeed, these powerful leaders' abuse would be more accurately explained by the idea that they believed that their abuse elicited higher performance from employees.

Second, we contribute to the leadership literature by highlighting the role of leaders' own lay beliefs about leader effectiveness in pushing employees to work harder. In the past, scholars have conducted research at the intersection of leadership and lay beliefs, most commonly through the lens of implicit leadership theory (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord et al., 1984; Lord & Dinh, 2014), which focuses on the characteristics associated with a prototypical leader from another's (typically an employee's) perspective. Here, we focus on leaders' own lay beliefs, and more specifically on their lay beliefs about what it means to be an effective leader. Leader behaviors are distinct from leader traits in predicting leadership effectiveness (DeRue et al., 2011),

![Fig. 3. The interaction of instrumentality beliefs and empathic concern on abusive supervision (Study 2).](image-url)
and we posit that lay beliefs follow a similar logic. Specifically, we expect that lay beliefs about effective leader behavior are distinct from lay beliefs about effective leader traits. We accordingly contend that leaders' own lay beliefs about specific leader behaviors are meaningful because they have a proximal, direct bearing on behaviors (and on downstream employee and organization outcomes). As such, our work contributes to the leadership literature as it explains how lay beliefs from the leader's perspective about a specific leader behavior are meaningful. This demonstration opens up new avenues for subsequent research that examines leader lay beliefs.

Finally, we contribute to the leadership literature by identifying leaders' concern for others as an important determinant of their behavior. In our study, empathic concern mitigated the effect of instrumentality beliefs, which supports the idea that lay beliefs do not operate in isolation, but rather within the context of a leader's overall goals and values. In the current context, leaders are at times conflicted as they try to increase performance while simultaneously trying to treat their employees respectfully. We posit that leaders either implicitly or explicitly weigh the benefits to performance against the costs to employee well-being when deciding how to manage their employees. Empathic behaviors are sometimes cast as "soft skills." Our model depicts how these behaviors are connected to the "hard numbers." Abusive supervision is considerably costly (Tepper et al., 2006), and since empathy tempers abusive supervision and its accompanying costs, an empathic leader is able to add great value to an organization.

**Practical implications**

Since instrumentality beliefs were shown to predict CWBs, a solution to deterring abusive supervision costs may be to change lay beliefs rather than focusing solely on leader behavior itself. Study 1 provides evidence that leader instrumentality beliefs are malleable and that changing leader instrumentality beliefs is a lever for organizations to reduce abusive supervision. Research has shown that changing beliefs has a meaningful impact on behavior. For example, students who are taught that abilities can be developed (instead of being fixed) perform better in academic and social contexts (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). As an organizational example, cognitive-based therapy reduces insomnia, thereby improving workplace behaviors (Barnes, Miller, & Bostock, 2017). Training toward beliefs in organizational developmental initiatives is thus viable, and organizations targeting instrumentality beliefs offers much promise. In the process, it will be important for organizations to note that lay beliefs have an entrenched nature (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Furnham, 1988). Leaders may continue to maintain an association between abuse and higher performance even if presented objective information to the contrary, which implies that some leaders will resist half-hearted sluggish attempts at curbing their beliefs.

Our model showcased how empathic concern can prevent instrumentality beliefs from having influence. Indeed, we demonstrated how empathy can counteract a leader's propensity to engage in the damaging and costly behavior of abusive supervision. One implication here for organizations is that they can make superior progress by fostering cultures built on empathy, compassion, and care. This implication aligns with the recent positive organizational scholarship movement (Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Roberts, 2006). Caring ethical climates have been shown to lead to more organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and well-being (Martin & Cullen, 2006). Our research suggests that organizations with such a climate will also experience less abusive supervision. To establish an empathic or caring climate, an organization can incorporate dispute resolution systems (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012) or routines involving service to others (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilis, 2006). In addition to directly solving disputes and helping others, these systems and routines signal to leaders and employees that the organization values justice and fairness, and can act as embedding mechanisms for organizational culture (Schein, 2010). In sum, empathy is a viable route for organizations seeking to mitigate abusive supervision.

**Limitations and future directions**

Although our research makes several key contributions to theory, it is nevertheless limited. For example, our operationalization of instrumentality beliefs contains items that touch on performance, hard work, avoiding mistakes, etc., but leaders may consider abuse to be instrumental for other specific reasons. For example, leaders may consider abuse to be instrumental because they believe that it will cause an employee they dislike to quit their job. The instrumentality of abuse may also be even more egocentric than currently presented, in that leaders may be more focused on how engaging in abuse influences others' direct perceptions of them. For instance, leaders might believe that abuse grants them social capital (Bourdieu, 1997), making them appear "tough." Leaders might believe that abuse will help boost their own performance appraisals or promotion opportunities. Subsequent research can consider other utility-fused reasons why leaders consider abuse to be instrumental, which can be included in the operationalization of instrumentality beliefs.

One route for future research would be to extend lay beliefs to other styles of leadership. For instance, within the domain of ethical leadership, leaders may hold varied lay beliefs about their obligations to demonstrate "normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships" (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005). On the one hand, leaders may believe that leadership is amoral in nature, and as such, believe they have no responsibility to champion ethics. While on the other hand, some leaders may believe that leadership is morally imbued, and accordingly think it is their full responsibility to champion ethics. Such lay beliefs may be brought to the surface in a similar manner as done in the current research, and would stand as a unique perspective within the ethical leadership literature.

Another opportunity to theoretically contribute to leadership research lies in examining the instrumentality beliefs leaders hold regarding other styles of leadership such as empowering leadership (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Existing work has demonstrated that leaders have lay beliefs about power (Anguinis, Nesler, Quigley, & Tedeschi, 1994; Coleman, 2004). Yet, it remains unclear to what degree leaders believe that empowering leadership breeds performance, and whether this belief influences empowering leadership behavior. Answering such questions would extend theory on empowering leadership.

Our results provide evidence that some leaders consider abuse to be instrumental in nature. One question that our model is unequipped at answering is the process of how these beliefs are developed. A natural extension of the current study would be an investigation of the direct and indirect experiences leaders have encountered, and how these experiences shape (or do not shape) their instrumentality beliefs. Lay beliefs are developed at a young age (Aymon-Nolley & Ayman, 2005; Keller, 2003), indicating that the scope of such a study should be longitudinal, and opened up beyond the leader's current tenure in his/her position. Identifying the source of instrumentality beliefs may be a matter of concurrently examining the leader's upbringing, media exposure vis-à-vis leadership figures, organizational climate, and current leader. Examining potential sources simultaneously would provide insight into what is driving the development of instrumentality beliefs.

Employee performance and abusive supervision have a significant meta-analytic correlation of −0.17 (Mackey et al., 2017; cf. Schyns & Schilling, 2013). If in truth there aren't any performance benefits stemming from abusive supervision, then instrumentality beliefs are completely unfounded, and leaders who hold these beliefs have been wholly misguided. The more likely story is that there are times when abuse does increase performance, but that it exacts a cost, suggesting more of a tradeoff process. It would be interesting to identify the work contexts where abuse does increase employee performance. Additionally, there may be a small number of employees who do respond
to abusive supervision with increased performance, which suggests that the actual instrumentality of abuse is contingent upon the target employee. A dynamic study of the pros and cons of instrumentality beliefs and abusive supervision on performance is outside the scope of the current study, and we suggest that more research be conducted in this area to determine the tradeoffs of short-term gains versus long-term costs, individual differences revolving around the victim, etc. that would further clarify whether and when instrumentality beliefs are at all warranted.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A. Instrumentality beliefs manipulation for Study 1

Managers exhibit many different leadership styles. Some are always kind and caring to their employees. They never ridicule their employees or are rude to them. They never make negative comments about their employees to others, or remind them of their past mistakes and failures. Other managers are occasionally less kind and caring. They might give their employees the silent treatment or be rude to them from time to time. Similarly, they might occasionally make negative comments about an employee to others, or remind an employee of past mistakes and failures.

Interestingly, some research has shown that when leaders remind employees of their past mistakes and failures, occasionally give them the silent treatment, and are sometimes rude to or ridicule them it can positively impact those employees' performance. Such "strong leadership" is demonstrated in the cases of Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos. Steve Jobs was known to consistently scold employees who didn’t meet his expectations. For example, when Apple’s MobileMe service experienced several setbacks, Jobs publicly reprimanded the development team for thirty minutes, using expletives and humiliation to make his point. Jeff Bezos has also been known to publicly rebuke his employees, initially upsetting them but ultimately pushing them to achieve great things.

In the space below, please offer a few thoughts on how and when this might be the case. In other words, how and when might a leader improve an employee's performance by occasionally reminding him/her of past mistakes, giving them the silent treatment, being rude to or ridiculing him/her, etc.

Appendix B. Scenario for Study 1

Imagine the following scenario:

You have been working in your firm—an emerging player in the competitive, fast-paced technology industry—for a number of years, and have been a team manager for the last two. Like most managers, you are directly responsible for your team members’ performance. Your performance appraisals, bonuses, and promotion opportunities are highly determined by the efforts of the employees you manage. In other words, driving employee performance is a very important part of your job.

You feel like your team is overworked, and you have important deadlines that you need to hit. You therefore request permission from your boss to hire on a new employee named Jordan with four years of work experience to join your team. Jordan has previous experience as a project manager, and is familiar with how your firm operates. He is accustomed to working in a team setting and to working under an immediate supervisor. Your boss grants you permission to hire Jordan, but leaves the conversation by stating, "Our quarterly financials are paramount this next quarter. I am holding you personally accountable for the output of this new employee. Don’t mess up." You look forward to the prospect of your new employee Jordan, but admit to yourself that you are a little anxious about how Jordan’s performance will affect you, the team, and the organization.

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