

# Empowered Employees as Social Deviants: The Role of Abusive Supervision

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## Abstract

**Purpose** The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and interpersonal deviance.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** Data were obtained from members of a professional hotel management association (Sample 1:  $n = 96$ ) and a diverse group of full-time employees (Sample 2:  $n = 130$ ). We used hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses to examine the effects of the perceived supervisory abuse  $\times$  psychological empowerment interaction on coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance.

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**Findings** Findings across two samples demonstrated that highly empowered employees were more likely than their less empowered counterparts to engage in coworker-directed deviance when they perceived supervisory abuse, but that psychological empowerment did not moderate the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and supervisor-directed deviance.

**Implications** Traditionally, psychological empowerment has been associated with auspicious workplace outcomes (e.g., heightened performance). Results across two samples suggest that highly empowered individuals are more likely than their less empowered counterparts to respond to perceived supervisory mistreatment with coworker-directed deviance. Thus, our results imply that there exists a “dark side” of empowerment such that the negative effects of perceived supervisory abuse trickle over to innocent bystander coworkers, and this relationship is even stronger for empowered employees.

**Originality/Value** This is one of only a few studies to examine moderators capable of altering the negative effects of perceptions of abusive supervision on individuals’ behaviors in the workplace. Additionally, this study is unique given the introduction of psychological empowerment to the abusive supervision literature.

**Keywords** Abusive supervision · Workplace deviance · Empowerment · Displaced aggression

## Introduction

In recent years, subordinates’ perceptions of abusive supervision have garnered increasing research attention, likely due to the wide array of individual- and organizational-level outcomes with which they are associated (Martinko et al. 2013; Tepper 2007). Among the array of

deleterious effects on employee attitudes and behaviors linked to perceptions of supervisory abuse, workplace deviance has been of particular interest in the abusive supervision literature (Martinko et al. 2013). Workplace deviance reflects “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both” (Robinson and Bennett 1995, p. 556). Although the association between perceptions of supervisory abuse and organization- and supervisor-directed deviance has consistently been found in prior research (Martinko et al. 2013), more research is needed to examine how perceptions of supervisory abuse may be associated with tendencies to engage in deviant behaviors directed toward coworkers (i.e., a trickle-over effect).

Recent research suggests that both personally experienced (i.e., perceived) and vicariously experienced (i.e., hearing about others experiencing abuse) supervisory abuse can influence employees’ responses to perceived supervisory abuse (Harris et al. 2013), and that employees’ perceptions of the workplace can influence behavioral tendencies associated with perceptions of abusive supervision (e.g., Mitchell and Ambrose 2012). One perception of the workplace that has garnered a great deal of scholarly attention is psychological empowerment (Maynard et al. 2012), which is a motivational construct that reflects an active orientation to shape one’s work role and context (Spreitzer 1995). Although empowerment is generally considered to have positive motivational effects in the workplace (Maynard et al. 2012), we consider the potentially dysfunctional effects of empowerment in relation to perceptions of abusive supervision and coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance.

Empowerment likely influences how employees respond to supervisory abuse. We use reactance (Brehm and Brehm 1981) and displaced aggression theories (Dollard et al. 1939) to examine how employees who are more or less empowered differentially react to perceptions of supervisory abuse. Taken together, these theories explain why empowered employees will react to perceived supervisory abuse with deviant behaviors and why employees choose their coworkers and supervisors as their targets for deviant behaviors. Specifically, highly empowered individuals are hypothesized to react more negatively to supervisory mistreatment and retaliate against such mistreatment by engaging in deviant behaviors as a means to reassert and reaffirm their impact and self-determination over their work environments than low empowerment employees. Moreover, we suggest that empowered employees will retaliate against perceptions of supervisory abuse directly by engaging in deviance directed toward their supervisors, as well as indirectly by targeting their coworkers who are convenient targets over which the abused employee can demonstrate their impact.

Although empirical evidence suggests employees’ perceptions of empowerment have positive effects on employee functioning and well-being (e.g., Maynard et al. 2012; Spreitzer 2008), it is possible that high levels of empowerment may also have negative ramifications for employees and organizations (e.g., reacting to supervisors’ negative behaviors with negative behaviors; moral hazard). For example, it is possible that employees may cause strain in the supervisor-subordinate work relationship because their desire to shape their work contexts may represent a threat to their supervisors (Spreitzer and Quinn 1996). This may be the case because supervisors worry about overly-empowered employees (i.e., “loose cannons”) who take too many risks that are not aligned with the needs of the organization (Spreitzer 2008). Thus, there is a need to examine the “dark side” of empowerment (Maynard et al. 2012), and it is important for research to consider the potentially deleterious effects empowerment may have in certain work contexts.

Therefore, the primary contribution of this research is to investigate the role of empowerment as an individual-level boundary condition in the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and employees’ tendencies to engage in coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance. Although psychological empowerment is generally considered to have positive effects in organizations, it is important for organizations to consider how empowering employees may also have detrimental effects. Therefore, the purpose of the present two sample investigation is to explore the role of employees’ perceptions of empowerment in the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance.

## Background Research, Theoretical Foundations, and Hypothesis Development

### Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision reflects “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper 2000, p. 178). Subordinate, supervisor, and organizational factors play an important role in determining whether or not employees perceive abuse, the extent to which they perceive abuse, and how they respond to perceptions of abuse (Martinko et al. 2013; Tepper 2007). Prior research has found that perceptions of supervisory abuse are associated with dysfunctional workplace attitudes and behaviors (Martinko et al. 2013; Tepper 2007) and negative consequences that carry over to home life (Carlson et al. 2011, 2012). Specifically, employees’ perceptions of abusive supervision

have been positively associated with anxiety (Tepper et al. 2007), job tension (Breaux et al. 2008), intentions to quit (Palanski et al. in press), and spousal undermining (Restubog et al. 2011) and negatively associated with work performance (Harris et al. 2007), job dedication (Aryee et al. 2008), job satisfaction (Haggard et al. 2011), psychological health (Lin et al. 2013), and life satisfaction (Bowling and Michel 2011).

Perhaps most troubling, however, is that subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision have been consistently linked to various forms of aggression, mistreatment, and other dysfunctional behaviors. Specifically, perceptions of supervisory abuse have been linked to behaviors such as sabotage (Wei and Si 2013), interpersonal aggression (Burton and Hoobler 2011), counterproductive work behavior (CWB; Bowling and Michel 2011), and various forms of workplace deviance (e.g., Mitchell and Ambrose 2007, 2012; Tepper et al. 2008). Moreover, research has found unequivocal evidence that suggests subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision are positively associated with employees' proclivities to engage in organizational deviance (e.g., Mitchell and Ambrose 2007; Tepper et al. 2008; Thau et al. 2008), interpersonal deviance (e.g., coworker-directed deviance; Lian et al. 2012; Mawritz et al. 2012; Shao et al. 2011; Thau et al. 2008), and supervisor-directed deviance (e.g., Mitchell and Ambrose 2007; Liu et al. 2010; Restubog et al. 2011; Thau and Mitchell 2010).

Some studies have examined individual differences that have the potential to influence reactionary behaviors associated with perceptions of abusive supervision. For example, Tepper et al. (2001) found that conscientiousness and agreeableness interacted with perceptions of abusive supervision such that subordinates' dysfunctional resistance behaviors increased for employees who were low in both conscientiousness and agreeableness. Also, Burton and Hoobler (2011) found that employees with high levels of narcissism were more likely to respond aggressively to perceptions of supervisory abuse than employees with low levels of narcissism.

Next, in their field study, Burton et al. (2011) found that employees with low self-esteem were more likely to report engaging in intended expressions of hostility than their high self-esteem counterparts, under high levels of perceived supervisory abuse. Finally, Mitchell and Ambrose (2012) found that employees' locus of control and fear of retaliation moderated the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and retaliation, such that low fear of retaliation and low locus of control exacerbated the relationship. In the present study, we extend research linking abusive supervision and workplace deviance to examine psychological empowerment as an individual-difference factor capable of exacerbating individuals' proclivities to

engage in coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance in response to perceived supervisory abuse.

### Psychological Empowerment

Generally, there are two forms of empowerment that have been studied: psychological and structural. Psychological empowerment reflects individuals' psychological states required to perceive a sense of control with regard to their work, whereas structural empowerment focuses on organizational factors and reflects transitioning responsibility and/or authority from upper-level managers to those lower in the organization (Spreitzer 2008). We focus on psychological empowerment rather than objective managerial practices designed to distribute responsibility and/or power. While types of social information and contextual features of the work environment that employees tend to keep salient (i.e., social information processing; Salancik and Pfeffer 1978) impact individuals' perceptions of control, psychological empowerment refers to the psychological states necessary for individuals to feel a sense of control at work (Spreitzer 2008), rather than perceptions of control *per se*.

In the present study, psychological empowerment reflects employees' personal beliefs about their organizational roles and is thought to influence how employees tend to construct their environments subjectively (Spreitzer 2008). Although it is not entirely stable, empowerment is relatively enduring and should not change quickly. In support of this conceptualization, Laschinger et al. (2004) found that levels of psychological empowerment among 268 Canadian nurses were not significantly different across two time periods approximately 3 years apart (i.e., sometime in 1998, early 2001).

Our conceptualization of psychological empowerment becomes clearer when examining the definitions of the four dimensions of psychological empowerment: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer 1995). First, meaning reflects the value of employees' work goals in relation to their own ideals or standards. Next, competence describes employees' beliefs about their abilities to perform work activities skillfully, and is synonymous with self-efficacy. Self-determination reflects employees' senses of possessing the choice in initiating and regulating their actions. Finally, impact describes the extent to which employees perceive they can influence strategic, administrative, and/or operating outcomes in their work environment. Altogether, meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact comprise the motivational construct of psychological empowerment, which is characterized as an orientation in which employees perceive they have the ability and desire to control their work contexts and roles (Spreitzer 1995).

Prior research has demonstrated the ability of psychological empowerment to moderate the relationship between

perceptions of the work environment and workplace outcomes. For example, Erdogan and Bauer (2009) found that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived over-qualification and a host of employee outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction, intentions to remain, voluntary turnover), such that high levels of psychological empowerment ameliorated the effects of perceptions of over-qualification on these outcomes. Also, Pieterse et al. (2010) found that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between transformational and transactional leadership and innovative behavior, such that highly empowered employees experienced a positive relationship between transformational leadership and innovative behavior, as well as a negative relationship between transactional leadership and innovative behavior.

Overall, the past 60 years of research examining psychological empowerment has advocated that empowerment at the individual, team, and organizational levels consistently has positive effects on the performance and well-being of organizations and their members; these findings have encouraged over 70 % of organizations to adopt means of promoting empowerment (Maynard et al. 2012). Specifically, psychological empowerment has been associated with heightened task and contextual performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, as well as reduced job strain and turnover intentions in both primary studies (e.g., Carless, 2004; Gregory et al. 2010; Spreitzer 1995) and meta-analytic investigations (Seibert et al. 2011).

Despite the strong support demonstrated for the positive effects of psychological empowerment on auspicious work outcomes, some research has demonstrated that these effects are not universal (e.g., Ahearne et al. 2005). In response, Maynard et al. (2012) called for research examining relevant contextual factors that could contribute to a “dark side” or down side of empowerment. In response, we examine how empowered employees react to perceived supervisory mistreatment (i.e., perceptions of abusive supervision).

Based on reactance and displaced aggression theories, we suggest that individuals’ self-perceptions of psychological empowerment will affect the extent to which empowered individuals engage in dysfunctional discretionary behaviors, as well as those at whom they direct their dysfunctional discretionary behaviors. Reactance theory suggests that individuals want to establish and maintain personal control within their environment (Brehm and Brehm 1981; Wright and Brehm 1982), and has been used in the past to explain individuals’ behavior in response to perceived supervisory mistreatment (e.g., Zellars et al. 2002).

According to reactance theory, when individuals perceive restriction and/or unfair control of their personal

actions, they react to remove or restrict the perceived restriction(s) (Brehm and Brehm 1981; Zellars et al. 2002). Thus, when individuals perceive supervisory abuse, they may react with discretionary behavior intended to demonstrate their impact over their work environment. Deviant behavior may provide a means for employees motivated to demonstrate their impact and reassert their importance over their environment (Wright and Brehm 1982). Specifically, we examine coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance as discretionary behavior that could demonstrate employees’ perceived impact over their work environments. Prior literature has found support for the association between perceptions of abusive supervision (i.e., a perceived restriction) and coworker- (e.g., Lian et al. 2012; Mawritz et al. 2012; Shao et al. 2011; Thau et al. 2008) and supervisor-directed deviance (e.g., Mitchell and Ambrose 2007; Liu et al. 2010; Restubog et al. 2011; Thau and Mitchell 2010).

We employ reactance theory to explore whether and why empowered individuals (i.e., those individuals who are motivated to shape their work contexts) who perceive supervisory abuse are motivated to demonstrate their impact over their work contexts. Although the direct association between perceptions of abusive supervision and supervisor-directed deviance may seem obvious, it is important to examine how perceptions of supervisory abuse may affect employees other than the focal employee who perceived supervisory abuse (e.g., vicarious abusive supervision; Harris et al. 2013). Because supervisors can have direct control over rewards, control over punishments, and decision latitude over the continuation or termination of employees’ employment contracts, reasserting importance/control by engaging in supervisor-directed discretionary deviant behavior may not be a viable option for some mistreated, yet empowered, employees.

In support, displaced aggression theory suggests that some employees perceiving supervisory abuse may direct their deviant behaviors against innocent others (e.g., coworkers) because such individuals are less powerful and/or more convenient targets than the perceived source of harm (Dollard et al. 1939). Consistent with past abusive supervision research employing displaced aggression theory (Burton et al. 2012; Harris et al. 2011; Hoobler and Brass 2006; Mitchell and Ambrose 2007, 2012; Wei and Si 2013), we suggest that employees may engage in coworker-directed deviance because retaliating with deviant behaviors aimed directly at the perpetrating supervisor might sometimes be risky given that such behavior could result in escalations of mistreatment. Thus, a “tit for tat” spiral may not exist between supervisors and subordinates because employees generally do not reciprocate abusive actions of a powerful supervisor (Lord 1998).



Also, employees may have more coworkers than supervisors and/or more interactions with coworkers than supervisors, providing employees with more opportunities to engage in deviant behaviors directed toward coworkers than supervisors (i.e., coworkers may be convenient targets). Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) and Wei and Si (2013) made similar arguments, and suggested that the harm-doers (i.e., supervisors) may not be available to retaliate against in some cases. Additionally, coworkers probably hold less power and/or discretionary reward power over employees than supervisors, so employees may deem their coworkers less likely than supervisors to retaliate in meaningful ways. Mitchell and Ambrose (2012) found that fear of retaliation moderated the relationship between supervisor aggression (i.e., perceptions of abusive supervision) and retaliation and coworker displaced aggression, such that low fear of retaliation was associated with increases in retaliation and coworker displaced aggression. Because coworkers likely hold less ability to retaliate in meaningful ways than supervisors, it stands to reason that employees may target their coworkers with their deviance associated with perceptions of abusive supervision.

Although the reasons highlighted above rely on displaced aggression theory to suggest employees may displace their deviance associated with perceptions of abusive supervision on coworkers, it is also possible that, based on reactance theory, employees respond to perceptions of abusive supervision directly with supervisor-directed deviance. This may be especially true when empowered employees do not believe their supervisors have significantly more power than themselves, employees have regular interaction with their supervisors, and/or when supervisors do not directly hold great amounts of discretionary reward power over their subordinates. For individuals who are highly empowered, it may be the case that they do not perceive their supervisors possess much discretionary power over them.

In sum, we argue that perceptions of abusive supervision are a source of perceived restriction that influences employees to engage in interpersonal deviance, particularly for highly empowered employees. Highly empowered employees are more likely to engage in interpersonal deviance as a way to reaffirm their importance, meaning, and beliefs over their work roles. To the extent to which coworkers and supervisors are perceived as providing a means of demonstrating impact over the environment, empowered employees who perceive supervisory abuse will likely engage in interpersonal deviance. Thus, we hypothesize that empowered employees will be more likely than their less empowered counterparts to engage in interpersonal deviance (i.e., coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance) in response to perceived supervisory abuse because engaging in interpersonal deviance represents a means to demonstrate importance and impact within the work environment.

**Hypothesis 1a** Employee self-perceptions of psychological empowerment will moderate the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and coworker-directed deviance such that highly empowered employees will increase their levels of coworker-directed deviance under conditions of high perceptions of abusive supervision more strongly than less empowered employees.

**Hypothesis 1b** Employee self-perceptions of psychological empowerment will moderate the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and supervisor-directed deviance such that highly empowered employees will increase their levels of supervisor-directed deviance under conditions of high perceptions of abusive supervision more strongly than less empowered employees.

## Overview of the Studies

In an effort to circumvent concerns stemming from single-study designs (Hochwarter et al. 2011), the present research utilized a two-sample design to test our hypothesis. Specifically, the two samples examined employees' self-perceptions of empowerment as a boundary condition in the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and coworker-directed deviant behaviors. Our second sample served as a means to replicate the findings from the first sample and test the study results using data collected over multiple points in time. Changes to sampling procedures, subjects selected, rating sources, and/or measures used are thought to result in constructive replications that provide greater evidence of the validity of initial results (Eden 2002; Lykken 1968). Further, consistent findings across multi-study research designs can help researchers draw more valid and meaningful contributions than could be attained from a research design (Hochwarter et al. 2011). Thus, we provide findings from two samples utilizing different sampling procedures in an attempt to increase confidence in the validity and generalizability of our research findings.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

#### *Sample 1*

Data for the first sample were collected via surveys distributed to 101 members of a professional hotel management association attending a presentation at an annual conference for practitioners. One of the study's authors was a presenter. None of the research content was directly discussed during the conference sessions, and all respondents filled out the

surveys immediately following the presentation. On-site drop boxes were used to collect completed surveys. We received a total of 101 completed surveys (response rate = 100 %).

Cases that were missing data for one or more of the focal constructs of interest were removed from the analysis. This resulted in a final sample size ( $n$ ) of 96 (response rate = 95 %). The sample was primarily female (56 %), averaged 40 years of age ( $SD = 18.68$ ), and had about 4 years of organizational tenure ( $SD = 5.68$ ). Respondents were predominantly Caucasian (87 %) or African American (7 %).

### Sample 2

Consistent with prior abusive supervision studies (e.g., Harvey et al. 2007; Martinko et al. 2011; Mawritz et al. 2012), undergraduate students helped with data collection for our second sample. Graduate and undergraduate students attending a university in the Midwest United States were offered extra credit to assist with gathering names and email addresses of family and friends 18 years of age or older who were working full-time for more than 3 years. This method of data collection has been used successfully in a number of studies (e.g., Liu et al. 2004; Treadway et al. 2005) and is conducted in an attempt to increase the generalizability of findings across multiple contexts (Hochwarter et al. 2007).

A total of 221 email addresses were received from students. Once email addresses were acquired, a faculty member communicated directly with the potential respondents. The study proceeded in two phases, with data collected at two points in time approximately 1–3 months apart. Phase 1 of the study elicited 190 completed surveys (i.e., response rate = 86 %), and Phase 2 resulted in 130 completed surveys (i.e., response rate of 59 %). All respondents who completed Time 1 and Time 2 surveys were matched based on names and demographics. The sample was primarily female (65 %), averaged about 42 years of age ( $SD = 11.59$ ), and about 10 years of organizational tenure ( $SD = 8.84$ ). Respondents were predominantly Caucasian (92 %) or African American (6 %). Respondents were employed in a variety of industries, including education, health, and social services (24.6 %), finance, insurance, real estate, and rental and leasing (14.6 %), and manufacturing (12.3 %).

### Measures

#### *Subordinates' Perceptions of Abusive Supervision*

Abusive supervision was measured with a 15-item scale developed by Tepper (2000). Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they perceived their boss exhibited certain abusive behaviors at work. Responses ranged from

1 (never) to 5 (very often). “Ridicules me” and “reminds me of my past mistakes and failures” represent sample items. The 15 items were averaged to form an overall score ( $\alpha = 0.90$  for Sample 1;  $\alpha = 0.93$  for Sample 2). Perceptions of abusive supervision were collected at Time 1 for Sample 2. A high score indicated a greater frequency of perceptions of abusive supervision.

#### *Empowerment*

Empowerment was measured with a 12-item scale developed by Spreitzer (1995). Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed they felt empowered in their work context. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). “I am confident about my ability to do my job” and “I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work” represent sample items. The 12 items were averaged to form an overall score ( $\alpha = 0.85$  for Sample 1;  $\alpha = 0.90$  for Sample 2). Empowerment was collected at Time 2 for Sample 2. A high score indicated greater perceptions of psychological empowerment.

#### *Coworker-Directed Deviance*

Coworker-directed deviance was measured with five items specifically referencing coworkers from Aquino et al.'s (1999) 15-item measure of workplace deviance. Respondents were asked to indicate the number of times they performed certain behaviors within the last 6 months, with responses ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (more than 20 times). “Made an ethnic, racial, or religious slur against a coworker,” “swore at a coworker,” “refused to talk to a coworker,” “made an obscene comment or gesture at a coworker,” and “teased a coworker in front of other employees” were the five items used. The five items were averaged to form an overall score ( $\alpha = 0.85$  for Sample 1;  $\alpha = 0.74$  for Sample 2), and were collected at Time 2 for Sample 2. A high score indicated a greater frequency of self-reported coworker-directed deviant behaviors.

#### *Supervisor-Directed Deviance*

Supervisor-directed deviance was measured with two items specifically referencing supervisors from Aquino et al.'s (1999) 15-item measure of workplace deviance. “Purposely ignored my supervisor's instructions” and “gossiped about my supervisor” were the two items used. The two items were averaged to form an overall score ( $r = .40$ ,  $p < .01$  for Sample 1;  $r = .32$ ,  $p < .01$  for Sample 2), and were collected at Time 2 for Sample 2. A high score indicated a greater frequency of self-reported supervisor-directed deviant behaviors.

### Control Variables

Age, gender, and organizational tenure served as demographic control variables. These three demographic control variables have been widely used in the abusive supervision literature (e.g., Kernan et al. 2011; Martinko et al. 2011; Tepper et al. 2006; Thau et al. 2008; Yagil 2006) given their relationships with the variables of interest. For our purposes, these control variables were included in an effort to examine the focal constructs' incremental predictive validity above and beyond relevant control variables (Carlson and Wu 2012).

### Results

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for Samples 1 and 2 are reported in Table 1. Perceptions of abusive supervision (Sample 1:  $\mu = 1.23$ ,  $\sigma = .38$ ; Sample 2:  $\mu = 1.42$ ,  $\sigma = .57$ ), coworker-directed deviance (Sample 1:  $\mu = 1.26$ ,  $\sigma = .58$ ; Sample 2:  $\mu = 1.25$ ,  $\sigma = .42$ ), and supervisor-directed deviance (Sample 1:  $\mu = 1.26$ ,  $\sigma = .48$ ; Sample 2:  $\mu = 1.43$ ,  $\sigma = .57$ ) all had low means and standard deviations in both samples, which is consistent with prior research (e.g., Mitchell and Ambrose 2007; Thau and Mitchell 2010), as well as with the notion that these are low base-rate phenomena. Also, the correlations between perceptions of abusive supervision, coworker-directed deviance, and supervisor-directed deviance were all significantly different from 1.0 (the highest correlation was between coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance

in Sample 1;  $r = .62$ ), which provided evidence of construct-level discriminant validity (Bagozzi et al. 1991).

We used hierarchical moderated multiple regression analysis (Cohen et al. 2003) to examine the impact of perceptions of abusive supervision on coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance, as well as the moderating effects of employees' perceptions of psychological empowerment on these relationships. Variables were entered into the regression analyses in three steps. In Step 1, we entered the control variables (i.e., age, gender, organizational tenure) into the regression equation. We entered perceptions of abusive supervision (independent variable) and self-perceptions of psychological empowerment (moderator) in Step 2. Finally, the abusive supervision  $\times$  psychological empowerment interaction term was entered in Step 3. Following the recommendations of Cohen and colleagues (Cohen et al. 2003), we mean-centered our independent variable and moderating variable prior to creating the interaction term in an attempt to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken and West 1991). Finally, we used Hayes' (2013) bootstrapping procedure ( $n = 5,000$ ) for testing moderation in order to confirm our results. Moreover, because we hypothesized directionality for each of the expected relationships, we evaluated the statistical significance of the relationships using one-tailed tests. The results of the regression analyses are reported in Table 2.

In Sample 1, coworker-directed deviance was statistically significantly predicted by age ( $B = -.01$ , 90 % confidence interval [CI] =  $[-.01, .00]$ ,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t = -2.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ), perceptions of abusive supervision ( $B = .68$ , 90 % CI =  $[.36, 1.01]$ ,  $\beta = .44$ ,  $t = 3.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and

**Table 1** Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	–	.09	.52**	–.04	.20*	.03	.11
2. Gender	–.01	–	–.05	–.03	.05	–.13	–.11
3. Organizational tenure	.37**	–.18	–	–.06	.13	–.04	–.03
4. Abusive supervision	–.03	–.12	.10	–	–.11	.15	.35**
5. Empowerment	.22*	–.22*	.19	–.32**	–	–.07	–.11
6. Coworker deviance	–.22*	–.19	–.05	.31**	–.13	–	.45**
7. Supervisor deviance	–.13	–.03	–.08	.60**	–.36**	.62**	–
Sample 1—M	40.01	.56	47.80	1.23	5.63	1.26	1.26
Sample 1—SD	18.68	.50	68.15	.38	.80	.58	.48
Sample 1— $\alpha$	–	–	–	.90	.85	.85	.40 <sup>a</sup>
Sample 2—M	42.01	.65	123.55	1.42	5.82	1.25	1.43
Sample 2—SD	11.59	.48	106.11	.57	.84	.42	.57
Sample 2— $\alpha$	–	–	–	.93	.90	.74	.32 <sup>a</sup>

Notes Correlations ( $r$ ) for Sample 1 ( $N = 96$ ) are presented below diagonal. Correlations ( $r$ ) for Sample 2 ( $N = 130$ ) are presented above diagonal. Gender coding: male = 0, female = 1. Organizational tenure was measured in months. Statistical tests are based on two-tailed tests

<sup>a</sup> Reflects  $r$  instead of  $\alpha$  because a two-item measure was used

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

**Table 2** Results of hierarchical moderated regression analysis

Variables and steps	Sample 1						Sample 2					
	Coworker-directed Dev.			Supervisor-directed Dev.			Coworker-directed Dev.			Supervisor-directed Dev.		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	-.22*	-.20*	-.21*	-.11	-.05	-.05	.09	.10	.06	.19*	.21*	.20*
Gender	-.19*	-.17	-.14	-.03	-.01	-.01	-.14	-.13	-.10	-.14	-.12	-.11
Organizational Tenure	.00	-.03	-.05	-.04	-.09	-.09	-.10	-.09	-.06	-.13	-.11	-.10
Abusive Supervision (AS)		.28**	.44**		.55**	.57**		.13	.15*		.33**	.34**
Empowerment (E)		-.03	-.05		-.16*	-.17*		-.06	-.06		-.10	-.10
AS $\times$ E			.27*			.02			.17*			.06
$R^2$	.09	.17	.21	.02	.40	.40	.02	.05	.07	.04	.17	.17
$\Delta R^2$		.08**	.04*		.38**	.00		.02	.03*		.13**	.00
Adj. $R^2$	.06	.12	.15	.00	.37	.36	.00	.01	.03	.02	.13	.13

Note  $N = 96$  for Sample 1.  $N = 130$  for Sample 2. Gender coding: male = 0, female = 1. Organizational tenure was measured in months. Standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) are reported. Statistical tests are based on one-tailed tests

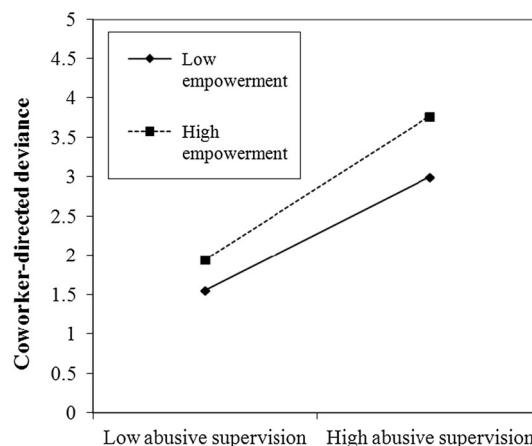
Dev Deviance

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

the abusive supervision  $\times$  empowerment cross-product term ( $B = .31$ , 90 % CI = [.08, .54],  $\beta = .27$ ,  $\Delta$  adjusted  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $t = 2.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ) in the final step of the analysis. Further, the conditional effect of abusive supervision on coworker-directed deviance increased as values of empowerment increased ( $B_{1\sigma\text{belowthemean}} = .44$ , 90 % CI = [.17, .70],  $\beta = .29$ ,  $t = 2.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $B_{1\sigma\text{abovethemean}} = .93$ , 90 % CI = [.47, 1.40],  $\beta = .61$ ,  $t = 3.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

In Sample 2, coworker-directed deviance was statistically significantly predicted by perceptions of abusive supervision ( $B = .11$ , 90 % CI = [.00, .22],  $\beta = .15$ ,  $t = 1.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the abusive supervision-empowerment cross-product term ( $B = .14$ , 90 % CI = [.02, .27],  $\beta = .17$ ,  $\Delta$  adjusted  $R^2 = .02$ ,  $t = 1.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ) in the final step of the analysis. Further, the conditional effect of abusive supervision on coworker-directed deviance increased as values of empowerment increased ( $B_{1\sigma\text{belowthemean}} = -.01$ , 90 % CI = [-.15, .13],  $\beta = -.01$ ,  $t = -.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $B_{1\sigma\text{abovethemean}} = .23$ , 90 % CI = [.07, .39],  $\beta = .31$ ,  $t = 2.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, **hypothesis 1a** was supported across both samples.

To offer a graphic depiction of the statistically significant interaction terms, we plotted high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) and low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) levels of empowerment across the range of abusive supervision scores (Stone and Hollenbeck 1989; Stone-Romero and Liakhovitski 2002). For Sample 1, simple slopes tests revealed that both the low ( $b = 1.92$ ,  $t = 2.38$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and high empowerment slopes ( $b = 2.41$ ,  $t = 2.34$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were positive and statistically significant (see Fig. 1). Figure 2 shows the plot of the significant interaction between abusive supervision and empowerment on coworker-directed deviance for

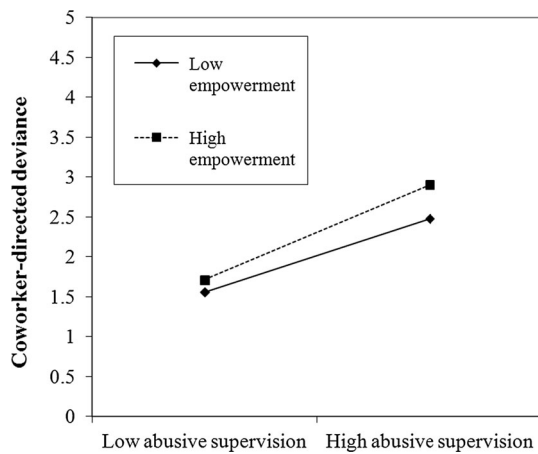


**Fig. 1** Interactive effects of abusive supervision and empowerment on coworker-directed deviance in Sample 1

Sample 2. Simple slopes tests revealed that both the low ( $b = .81$ ,  $t = 2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and high empowerment slopes ( $b = 1.05$ ,  $t = 2.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were positive and statistically significant. Moreover, the forms of both interactions were in the hypothesized direction. Interestingly, highly empowered employees appeared to be more likely to engage in coworker-directed deviance than their less empowered counterparts in both, low and high, perceived supervisory abuse conditions.

In Sample 1, supervisor-directed deviance was statistically significantly predicted by perceptions of abusive supervision ( $B = .71$ , 90 % CI = [.48, .95],  $\beta = .57$ ,  $t = 5.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and empowerment ( $B = -.10$ , 90 % CI = [-.19, -.01],  $\beta = -.17$ ,  $t = -1.76$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Despite a non-statistically





**Fig. 2** Interactive effects of abusive supervision and empowerment on coworker-directed deviance in Sample 2

significant interaction effect between abusive supervision and empowerment on supervisor-directed deviance, the conditional effect of abusive supervision on supervisor-directed deviance increased as values of empowerment increased ( $B_{1\text{belowthemean}} = .70$ , 90 % CI = [.51, .88],  $\beta = .55$ ,  $t = 6.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $B_{1\text{abovethemean}} = .73$ , 90 % CI = [.40, 1.06],  $\beta = .58$ ,  $t = 3.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

In Sample 2, supervisor-directed deviance was statistically significantly predicted by age ( $B = .01$ , 90 % CI = [.00, .02],  $\beta = .20$ ,  $t = 1.99$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and perceptions of abusive supervision ( $B = .34$ , 90 % CI = [.20, .48],  $\beta = .34$ ,  $t = 4.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Again, the conditional effect of abusive supervision on supervisor-directed deviance increased as values of empowerment increased ( $B_{1\text{belowthemean}} = .28$ , 90 % CI = [.10, .46],  $\beta = .28$ ,  $t = 2.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $B_{1\text{abovethemean}} = .40$ , 90 % CI = [.20, .60],  $\beta = .40$ ,  $t = 3.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Overall, **hypothesis 1b** was not supported by the results from either sample. This finding likely was due to the inability of the abusive supervision  $\times$  empowerment interaction to predict incremental variance in supervisor-directed deviance above and beyond the strong direct effects of perceptions of abusive supervision (Sample 1:  $\beta = .57$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Sample 2:  $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

Our empirical evidence suggests that the relationship between employees' perceptions of supervisory abuse and coworker-directed deviance is more complex than the "tit-for-tat" relationship typically found between perceptions of abusive supervision and supervisor-directed deviance. This suggests that important boundary conditions and explanatory mechanisms may play an important role in shaping the

relationship between perceptions of supervisory abuse and coworker-directed deviance. We provide empirical evidence demonstrating that highly empowered employees who perceive supervisory abuse tend to engage in coworker-directed deviance with greater frequency than less empowered employees. Our study increases our confidence in the validity and generalizability of our results (Hochwarter et al. 2011), and offers evidence that employees' self-perceptions of psychological empowerment serve as an important boundary condition capable of exacerbating the frequency with which individuals engage in coworker-directed deviance in environments characterized by supervisory mistreatment. Further, our findings highlight the important role employees' perceptions of the workplace may play in employees' responses associated with perceptions of supervisory abuse.

## Theoretical Contributions

We highlight that the association between experienced mistreatment (i.e., perceptions of supervisory abuse) and tendencies to engage in interpersonal mistreatment (i.e., coworker- and supervisor-directed deviance) is complex, and that employees' perceptions of the workplace play important roles as boundary conditions in this relationship. We extend previous research by demonstrating empirical support for the role of employee self-perceptions of psychological empowerment as a moderator in the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and coworker-directed deviance. This study is the first to consider the effects of empowerment as a boundary condition capable of differentially influencing the association between perceptions of supervisory abuse and negative workplace behaviors. Thus, we help answer Maynard et al.'s (2012) call for examinations of the "dark side" of empowerment.

Our findings suggest that despite the potential benefits of empowering employees, it is also possible that empowered employees may be those who are most motivated to respond to interpersonal mistreatment, and they may choose to do so by directing interpersonal mistreatment toward coworkers; thus, we provide empirical support for a form of supervisory abuse trickle-over effect whereby empowered employees who perceive supervisory abuse attempt to demonstrate their impact and personal importance by engaging in mistreatment directed toward their coworkers. Reactance and displaced aggression theories underpinned our hypotheses that highly empowered employees were purported to be more motivated to engage in deviant behaviors (i.e., coworker and supervisor-directed deviance) as a means to reaffirm their impact over the work environment than their less empowered counterparts.

Our results add to our understanding of how individual differences (i.e., self-perceptions of psychological

empowerment) influence the relationship between subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision and interpersonal deviance. By examining employee self-perceptions of empowerment, we contribute to the current scarcity of abusive supervision research examining the role of individual-level variables as factors capable of influencing individuals' reactions to perceived supervisory abuse. Our findings suggest that not only is abusive supervision a uniquely and subjectively experienced phenomenon, but victims' reactions associated with abusive supervision also vary based on victims' subjectively held perceptions of themselves.

### Practical Implications

Supervisors need to be aware that although the benefits of psychological empowerment in terms of enhanced performance and positive affective reactions are wide-reaching (Seibert et al. 2011), empowerment can also be costly; specifically, when empowered employees perceive mistreatment from their supervisors, they appear to displace their retaliatory efforts toward coworkers. Although we do not advocate that organizations should avoid or downplay empowerment initiatives, we highlight that empowering employees without regard for the interpersonal dynamics at play within organizations could result in unforeseen consequences for organizations and those within them. Thus, supervisors need to be supremely cognizant of how their behaviors toward certain individuals can engender toxic interpersonal behaviors down the line. Highly empowered employees play a critical role in shaping their work roles and contexts, because, by definition, they exert influence on the organization by impacting operating outcomes. Therefore, by acting in manners that are perceived as abusive, supervisors may be hurting those who are able to shape the work environment for the better or for worse.

Further, as recommended by Sutton (2007), organizations can adopt and openly espouse strict policies against incivility in the workplace; when made explicit, such policies (e.g., Google's "don't be evil" policy) send the message that interpersonal mistreatment is not tolerable and provide employees recourse to be forthcoming when such mistreatment occurs. Additional human resource (HR) practices can be implemented to promote a civilized workforce and to protect employees who perceive mistreatment. For instance, 360° performance evaluations can be used to identify sources of mistreatment (e.g., lateral, vertical) and an HR hotline can be put in place for the purpose of reporting incivility between any individuals in the workplace. Finally, in keeping with Sutton's (2007) recommendations, organizations might consider training employees how to engage in constructive conflict; such training practices recognize that conflict and interpersonal misgivings are inevitable, yet surmountable, should they be

addressed constructively and not brushed under the rug or allowed to compound over time. Taken together, these HR practices can help employees, especially empowered employees, to air their grievances and constructively manage maltreatment from their supervisors rather than retaliating in a tit-for-tat or trickle-over manner.

### Limitations

Our study was not without limitations. First, our measure of supervisor-directed deviance only consisted of two items taken from Aquino et al.'s (1999) measure of workplace deviance. Future studies would benefit from using more extensive measures of supervisor-directed deviance (e.g., Mitchell and Ambrose 2007) than the measure used in this study. Further, we limited our outcomes to deviant behaviors. Clearly, there are numerous other discretionary behaviors in which employees may engage when faced with abusive supervision besides deviance.

The primary limitation of our study was its reliance on the use of self-reported measures, which may increase the likelihood that common method bias was present in the data. Common method bias can inflate or deflate relationships (Chan 2000; Podsakoff et al. 2012; Richardson et al. 2009), but its effects are often exaggerated (Chan 2000). Nonetheless, common method variance is unlikely to result in an artificial interaction effect, but rather oftentimes attenuates a true interaction effect (Evans 1985; Siemsen et al. 2010). Thus, because the purpose of the present investigation was to establish interaction effects, our concerns about common method variance were minimized.

The use of self-reports in our study was justifiable (Conway and Lance 2010) because employees themselves are the most qualified individuals to evaluate and report the frequency with which they engage in deviant behaviors, especially because such behaviors are oftentimes underhanded and clandestine. Additionally, employees are most adequately suited to report abusive supervision because it is, by definition, a perception, rather than an objective reality. In our second sample, we separated the collection of focal constructs of interest by 1–3 months to minimize concerns commonly associated with common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003, 2012). Further, our measures of coworker- and supervisor-directed deviant behavior did not simply measure perceptions of deviance, but asked individuals to self-report their actual behaviors. We argue that separating the collection of focal constructs by time and asking about the frequency of actual work behaviors limits the possibility for contamination due to common method variance. As another precautionary measure, the constructs and demographic items in the survey were ordered in a manner that was meant to avoid priming effects (Podsakoff et al. 2003, 2012).

## Future Research

There are numerous avenues for future research that warrant mentioning. First, future research could examine self-perceptions of psychological empowerment at the workgroup, departmental, organizational, and industry levels. The size of workgroups, departments, organizations, and industries likely plays an important role in determining how self-perceptions of empowerment are formed and the meaning these perceptions hold for employees. Identity is another fruitful area for future research because employees' identities probably play a key role in determining the extent to which employees differentially associate with their workgroups, departments, organizations, and industries. Thus, much work is needed to examine how employees become empowered and how self-perceptions of empowerment influence a wide range of organizational processes and outcomes, not just proclivities to engage in interpersonal deviance.

Moreover, future research could continue to examine the dark side of empowerment (Maynard et al. 2012). Although our findings appeared to indicate that highly empowered employees were more likely to respond to perceptions of abusive supervision with coworker-directed deviance than less empowered employees, future research could explore other manners in which empowerment results in inauspicious consequences for the organization and its members. For instance, perhaps empowered employees take liberties when solving organizational issues (e.g., interpersonal disagreements, inadequate/unfair allocations of resources) that are beyond their formal span of control. Such behavior, although perhaps well-intentioned, may cause resentment between empowered employees and other employees who may feel threatened or put-off in perceiving that empowered employees are extending their reach too far beyond their formal duties.

In keeping with this notion, highly empowered employees may be less liked by their lesser- or non-empowered peers than less empowered employees, and unknowingly incite spirals of incivility and/or contribute to toxic work environments over time. Therefore, future research could also consider the interpersonal implications of highly empowered employees' presences in work environments, especially regarding interactions characterized by disparate levels of empowerment between employees. The forgoing discussion implies that the effects of empowerment may be curvilinear, such that too much or too little empowerment might manifest in some of the "darker side" implications for the organization and its members. For instance, is a highly empowered employee so ardent in their desire to make an impact that they are perceived as narcissistic? Or are they so efficacious in their ability to incite meaningful change that they are considered narcissistic? This implies that an optimal level of

empowerment might exist, below or beyond which the effects of empowerment are suboptimal. Future research could examine this possibility.

Moreover, previous research has conceptualized subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision as a stressor (e.g., Aryee et al. 2008; Carlson et al. 2012; Chi and Liang 2013). Consistent with the differential exposure-reactivity model (Bolger and Zuckerman 1995), future research could examine how employees' self-perceptions of psychological empowerment influence employees' perceptions of and responses to stressors (e.g., perceptions of abusive supervision and other forms of interpersonal mistreatment) in the workplace.

Finally, future research can address empirical issues related to the present study. Tepper and Henle (2011) described the formative measurement issue that arises when examining interpersonal mistreatment behaviors, and suggested that it may not be appropriate to treat different behaviors that may be construed as deviant (i.e., behaviors that are likely to violate organizational norms) as "interchangeable indicators of an underlying construct" (p. 494). Measurement artifacts may also be an issue. Spector et al. (2010) addressed the issue of measurement artifacts in the assessment of workplace behaviors [i.e., CWB, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB)], and found greater means, greater ranges, and more variance (i.e., greater standard deviations) for CWBs and OCBs that were rated along agreement scales (i.e., "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") than behaviors that were rated along frequency scales (i.e., "never" to "every day"); however, Spector et al. (2010) ultimately recommended the use of frequency scales. Thus, future research could incorporate these and other researchers' findings and suggestions when attempting to develop psychometrically sound means of empirically measuring workplace deviance.

## Conclusion

Our results corroborate past research that suggests perceptions of abusive supervision are associated with workplace deviance, but suggest that this relationship may be more complex than originally thought. Specifically, our findings across two samples suggested that employees with greater self-perceptions of psychological empowerment were more likely than their less empowered counterparts to engage in coworker-directed deviance under conditions of perceived supervisory abuse, whereas a direct relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and supervisor-directed deviance may exist. Thus, our study provides empirical support for a trickle-over effect, whereby perceptions of supervisory mistreatment (i.e., abusive supervision) are associated with tendencies to engage in mistreatment (i.e.,

deviance) directed toward coworkers, especially for highly empowered employees. Our results also contribute to the sparse research examining the potential “dark side” of empowerment, and suggest that high levels of psychological empowerment may not necessarily be optimal in environments characterized by mistreatment. In summary, subordinates’ perceptions of abusive supervision appear to be even more caustic when the targets of such supervisory abuse are highly empowered employees who are motivated to demonstrate personal impact by altering their discretionary behaviors, work roles, and work contexts.

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