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## Abusive Supervision: Observer Perceptions of Causes and Consequences

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# *Journal of the North American Management Society*

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## **Abusive Supervision: Observer Perceptions of Causes and Consequences<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract: The research examined the circumstances under which observers believe a worker would remain in a situation where abusive supervision occurs and the perceived reasons why such supervision happens. Eight different vignettes were created by independently varying the age and experience of the worker (young and inexperienced or older and experienced), the status of the boss (high or low), and the benefits and compensation the worker received (high or low). In all vignettes the male boss abusively responds to a report completed by a female worker. Undergraduate men and women business students at a Midwestern university read one of the vignettes and indicated whether the worker would stay at the company under the circumstances described in the vignette. The subjects were also asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with eight reasons for the boss's behavior and five reasons for why the worker would remain in the situation. Several significant effects for the independent variables were obtained along with a number of gender effects. The implications of the results for abusive supervision are discussed along with the limitations of the research.*

“One fall afternoon in the late 1980s in a glass-walled conference room at Next Computer's California headquarters, Steven Jobs, five other company founders, and a smattering of employees met to review the design of their embryonic computer. A manufacturing manager started explaining that making its black, space-age magnesium shell would cost \$200 a unit or more.

After roughly two minutes, Jobs, his face turning red, cut the startled man off in mid sentence and began screaming wildly that the shell had to cost \$20, that the manager didn't know what he was talking about, and that he was going to ruin the company. The expletive-laden tirade lasted three to four minutes. Of course, the shell of Next's ill-fated computer ended up costing \$200. Says a former employee who was present at the meeting: ‘Tell Steve you can't do something because it violates the laws of physics, and he says that's not good enough (Fortune 1993, p. 38).’”

Steve Jobs is one of America's toughest bosses and he is in good company with many other well-known tough bosses and coaches, including Linda Wachner (former CEO of Warnaco), T. J. Rodgers (CEO of Cypress Semiconductor), Al “Chainsaw” Dunlap (former CEO of Sunbeam), Harvey Weinstein (cofounder of Miramax Films), Bobby Knight (former Indiana University head basketball coach), and Mike Ditka (former head coach of the Chicago Bears), to name a few. That tough bosses or “great intimidators” (Kramer 2006) can get amazing results is not disputed. However, it is also clear that other management styles which are much more positive, such as Goleman's (1998) emotionally intelligent and Collins' level 5 leaders (2001), also do. Moreover, that abusive supervision also has negative consequences cannot be overlooked (Tepper 2000). One of the major questions the current research addresses is, everything else being equal, why do observers believe workers stay in organizations where abusive supervision occurs? The research is also relevant to the growing body of literature concerned

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<sup>1</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge Renee Menard's support of the research.

with aggression (and its many variants, such as, bullying, mobbing, incivility, etc.) in the workplace (Neumann & Baron 2005).

Social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley 1959) offers one answer to the question. According to this theory, people seek out and maintain relationships in which rewards or benefits exceed the costs and terminate relationships in which the costs exceed the benefits. This rational economic or hedonistic perspective also maintains that when people are making decisions about a specific relationship, they not only consider the rewards and costs in the current relationship but also the possible rewards and costs in other available or alternative relationships. If no alternative relationships are available or if none of the available relationships are significantly more rewarding, people may stay in their current relationships even if they're not especially rewarding, or worse yet, even dissatisfying and harmful (Rusbult & Martz 1995).

For years the family violence literature has examined a specific version of these exchange notions--the role of dependency in the maintenance or termination of abusive relationships (e.g., Bornstein 2006; Gelles 1976; Kalmuss & Straus 1982; Rusbult & Martz 1995). The theory and supporting research indicate that objective economic dependency is a major reason why women remain in abusive relationships. That is, women in low-paying occupations or those receiving welfare have been found to be significantly less likely to end an abusive relationship than other women. Subjective dependency (an index including a range of dependency domains including financial, sexual, emotional, and interpersonal/social) has also been found to increase the risk of victimization in relationships.

Based on these notions, the current research looked at how the age and experience of the worker who is abused, the compensation and benefits she received, and the status of her abusive boss influenced observers' perception of her willingness to stay in the relationship with the following expectations. 1) We reasoned that the younger and less experienced worker would be more dependent on the relationship than the older, more experienced one. The latter individual presumably has more job options because of her experience; in addition, the former may be more likely to stay for fear of being viewed as a "job hopper" or malcontent. 2) Everything else being equal, we expected that the person who makes more money and receives better benefits would be more dependent on the **work** relationship than the one who makes less money and receives fewer benefits. Though this is opposite to what occurs in **intimate** relationships, it follows logically from an exchange or economic dependency perspective. 3) We expected that the worker whose boss has high status would have more to gain from the relationship than the one whose boss has low status and hence would be more dependent on the relationship and less likely to leave. Lastly, the research specifically examined a number of reasons why a person would remain in such a relationship, such as, economic and other forms of dependency.

The research also addressed the issue of how abusive behavior is explained or what types of attributions are offered for it. Behavior can be attributed to internal causes (e.g., traits, ability, skill) or external causes (e.g., role requirements, threats, bribes) and the causes may be viewed as stable (traits, task difficulty) or unstable (effort, luck) (Heider 1958; Weiner 1986). These attributions offered by outsiders may be among the factors that maintain it. For example, it might be expected that the abusive behavior of a high status person will be attributed to external and unstable causes more readily than for a low status one. That is, the high status person is doing his job; he is not abusive or mean spirited by nature. In fact, research on incivility has found that high status individuals are not only more likely to be uncivil but are also more likely to get away with even public displays of it than individuals of lower status (Pearson & Porath 2005). How their behavior is explained may be among the reasons for the latter finding.

## METHOD

### Subjects and Design

The subjects were 160 students from business core classes at a Midwestern state university, half of whom were women and half of whom were men. Equal numbers of men and women were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions generated by the fully crossed between subjects 2X2X2X2 factorial design. The independent variables were the age and experience of the woman employee (23 years old with one year of work experience or 43 years old with 21 years of work experience), the status of the male supervisor (high or low), the compensation and benefits received by the woman employee (high or low), and the gender of the respondents. The average age of the respondents was 22.5 years.

### Procedure and Materials

The eight different vignettes generated by the factorial design were randomly distributed separately to the men and women in the core courses. The vignette was accompanied by the same cover letter which described the general purpose of the research and ensured the students that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous.

In every vignette the male boss, Bill, publicly and abusively responds to a report that his subordinate Nancy has just completed. In the vignette, Nancy is depicted as either 23 years old with one year of work experience or 43 years old with 21 years of work experience. In the high status condition Bill (the male boss) is described as the Director of Human Resources who has gained considerable authority during his tenure and who is very influential with the “higher-ups” at the company. In the low status position Bill is described as a supervisor who has little authority within the company and does not associate with many of the upper level managers. In the high compensation and benefits condition Nancy’s salary is \$50,000 a year and she receives health, dental, and life insurance as well as being fully vested in her retirement plan. In the low compensation and benefits condition Nancy is paid \$25,000 and she receives health insurance. All other parts of the vignette were identical.

Following is the complete vignette description for the 43 year old employee who works for the high status boss and receives the high benefits package:

*Nancy is a single 43-year old worker with no children. She has been in the workforce since she graduated college 20 years ago and has worked at Clark Industries for 1 year as a Human Resources Generalist. Nancy has a bachelor’s degree in business and makes \$50,000 per year. She also receives health, dental, and life insurance and is fully vested in her retirement plan.*

*Her boss, Bill, is the Director of Human Resources and has been with the company for 25 years. He has gained considerable authority in those years and is very influential with the “higher-ups” at Clark.*

*Nancy has just completed a project for Bill. As Nancy sits in her cubicle, Bill approaches her. “How incompetent are you? This report is terrible; you must have slapped it together in ten minutes. Are you worthless? I don’t know how you were hired in the first place!” Bill throws the report at Nancy and turns to the man in the next cubicle and says, “Can you believe her?” Turning back to Nancy he says, “Now I will have to do this over myself. I guess we know who can handle a simple project and who can’t!” Bill stomps off and leaves Nancy sitting at her desk with everyone staring.*

After reading the vignette, the subjects in the experiment were asked to respond to the following item:

**Under the circumstances, how likely is Nancy to stay at Clark Industries?**

Absolutely Certain	Very Certain	Somewhat Certain	Uncertain	Somewhat Certain	Very Certain
Absolutely To Leave	To Leave	To Leave		To Stay	To Stay
Certain To Stay					Certain To Stay
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
					<b>7</b>

On the next page of the experimental materials, the subjects were then asked to respond to possible reasons for Bill’s behavior and possible reasons for Nancy’s decision to remain in the situation.

The verbatim instructions for this page follow:

*The items on this questionnaire ask for your personal response regarding the behaviors of Bill and Nancy in the scenario you just reviewed. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The best response is your honest response to each item on the survey. Please read each statement carefully and use the following scale to indicate your degree of disagreement or agreement with each of the statements below. Circle the number that best represents your response. Work quickly and give your first impression.*

Using a 5-point Likert-like scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree), the subjects were asked to indicate their disagreement or agreement with the following reasons for Bill’s behavior:

- Bill is having a bad day
- Nancy did a bad job on this project
- Nancy is incompetent
- Bill’s management style is punishing
- Nancy didn’t try hard
- Bill is mean-spirited
- Nancy allows him to do it
- Bill is abusing his power

Using the same scale, the subjects were then asked to indicate their disagreement or agreement with the following reasons for why Nancy remains in the situation:

- Nancy would experience severe financial losses
- Nancy is afraid of being viewed as a “job hopper”
- Nancy thinks Bill’s status can help her career in the company
- Nancy would feel like a quitter if she left and hurt her self-esteem
- Nancy thinks she can learn a great deal from Bill

Lastly the students were asked to indicate their age and gender.

## RESULTS

All dependent measures were analyzed with a 2X2X2X2 between subjects analysis of variance.

### Likelihood of Staying

For the item measuring Nancy's likelihood of staying, main effects were obtained for gender and benefits. Women ( $M=3.0$ ) indicated that Nancy would be more likely to leave than men ( $M=3.5$ ),  $F(1, 144)=4.8$ ,  $p<.05$ . The respondents also indicated that Nancy would be more likely to stay in the high compensation and benefits condition ( $M=3.6$ ) than low ( $M=2.9$ ),  $F(1, 144)=9.8$ ,  $p<.01$ .

### Reasons for Bill's Behavior

For the having a **bad day** reason, a main effect for status was found, indicating that the behavior of the boss with high status ( $M=3.6$ ) was more likely to be seen as the result of a bad day than the boss with low status ( $M=3.0$ ),  $F(1,144)=8.1$ ,  $p<.01$ .

A main effect for gender was obtained on the reason which said that Nancy did a **bad job**. Men ( $M=3.1$ ) were more likely to agree with this reason for Bill's behavior than women ( $M=2.5$ ),  $F(1,144)=20.25$ ,  $p<.001$ .

The same results were obtained for the reason which said Nancy is **incompetent**. Men ( $M=2.3$ ) were more likely than women ( $M=1.8$ ) to explain Bill's behavior with this reason,  $F(1,144)=22.0$ ,  $p<.001$ .

A main effect for gender was also obtained on the reason which said that Bill's management style is **punishing**. Women ( $M=4.3$ ) were more likely to agree with this reason than men ( $M=3.9$ ),  $F(1,144)=6.3$ ,  $p<.05$ .

Main effects for gender and age were found on the reason which stated that Nancy **didn't try hard**. Men ( $M=2.6$ ) were more likely to agree with this reason than women ( $M=2.3$ ),  $F(1,144)=10.0$ ,  $p<.01$ . The respondents, regardless of gender, were also more likely to agree with this reason for the younger, less experienced worker ( $M=2.6$ ) than for the older, more experienced one ( $M=2.3$ ),  $F(1,144)=3.9$ ,  $p<.05$ .

No significant results were obtained for the reason that Bill is **mean-spirited**.

For the reason which stated that Nancy **allows him to do it**, a gender main effect was once again obtained. Men ( $M=3.0$ ) were more likely to endorse this reason than women ( $M=2.7$ ),  $F(1,144)=3.9$ ,  $p<.05$ .

On the final reason for Bill's behavior that was examined in the study (he is **abusing his power**), a gender effect was also obtained. Women ( $M=4.2$ ) were more likely to agree with this reason than men ( $M=3.7$ ),  $F(1,144)=4.2$ ,  $p<.05$ .

### Reasons for Why Nancy Remains in the Situation

For the reason that stated Nancy would **experience severe financial losses**, a marginally significant main effect for status was found. The respondents were more likely to agree with this reason in the high ( $M=3.4$ ) than low status ( $M=3.0$ ) condition,  $F(1,144)=3.7$ ,  $p<.06$ .

For the "**job hopper**" reason no main effects were found.

Main effects for gender, status, and benefits were found for the reason that said **Bill's status can help her career in the company**. Men ( $M=2.6$ ) were more likely to agree with this reason than women ( $M=2.3$ ),  $F(1,144)=4.8$ ,  $p<.05$ . Not surprisingly, the respondents were more likely to agree with this reason in the high status ( $M=2.7$ ) than low status ( $M=2.3$ ) condition,  $F(1,144)=8.6$ ,  $p<.01$ . Lastly, respondents in the low benefits condition ( $M=2.7$ ) were more likely to endorse this reason than those in the high benefits one ( $M=2.2$ ),  $F(1,144)=10.9$ ,  $p<.001$ .

No main effects were obtained for the reason that said Nancy would **feel like a quitter and hurt her self esteem**.

For the reason that stated Nancy **thinks she can learn a great deal from Bill**, main effects were obtained for gender and status. Men ( $M=2.5$ ) were more likely to agree with this reason than women ( $M=2.0$ ),  $F(1,144)=10.4$ ,  $p<.01$ . The respondents in the high status condition ( $M=2.5$ ), not surprisingly, agreed more strongly with this reason than those in the low status one ( $M=2.1$ ),  $F(1,144)=8.3$ ,  $p<.01$ .

## DISCUSSION

For the overall measure of the worker's likelihood of staying in a company where abusive supervision occurs, one prediction was confirmed. The subjects indicated that the worker would be more likely to stay when her pay and benefits were relatively good or when she was economically more dependent on the job. Neither the worker's age and experience nor the status of the boss affected the respondents' perceptions on this measure. One other significant finding, a main effect for gender, was obtained on this measure. Women said that the woman worker would be more likely to leave than men. Among other possibilities, this finding may reflect the women's greater identification with and empathy for "one of their own" and/or gender differences in tolerance of aggressive behavior, in general, and abusive supervision, in particular.

A consistent pattern of gender findings was obtained for the respondents' explanations of the male boss's abusive behavior. While the women were more likely to explain his behavior in terms of internal causes (punishing style, abusing his power), the men were more inclined to explain his behavior in terms of external causes (she did a bad job, she's incompetent, she allows him to do it). To the extent the respondents are identifying with their own gender, the outcomes are consistent with the well documented actor/observer differences in attribution (E. E. Jones & Nisbett 1972). Essentially, this notion states that actors are more likely to explain their behavior, especially negative behavior, in terms of external causes while the observer explains the behavior in terms of internal causes. Thus, the men who identify with Bill (the actor) see Nancy's behavior (an external factor) as causal whereas the women, who are observers of Bill's behavior and who identify with Nancy, view his behavior as internally caused.

Two other results were obtained for the explanations of the male boss's abusive behavior. Consistent with the expectation, the respondents were more likely to say that the boss with high status was having a bad day than the boss with low status. In other words, the bad behavior of the high status boss gets explained by an unstable (i.e., temporary and fleeting) internal factor, thereby minimizing and possibly maintaining the bad behavior. Lastly, for the reason that said Nancy didn't try, the respondents were more likely to agree with this reason for the young, inexperienced worker than for the older, more experienced one. Evidently, the subjects were more willing to take for granted the effort of older, more experienced workers relative to their younger, less experienced counterparts.

For the reasons why Nancy remains in the situation, several results consistent with social exchange and dependency notions were found. Specifically, for the reason that stated Nancy would experience severe financial losses, the respondents were more likely to say she would remain in the high status

condition than low. Evidently, the respondents thought she would more likely benefit financially in the future with the boss with greater influence and authority. For the reasons, Bill's status can help her and she can learn a great deal from him, main effects were obtained for status. For both reasons, the respondents thought Nancy was more likely to stay with the high status boss than low status one. These findings are not only another reflection of participants' perceptions of Nancy's dependency on the relationship but also basically serve as manipulation checks for the status independent variable. Gender main effects were also found for both these measures with men more likely to agree with them than women. The men apparently afforded Bill more power and influence than the women, a finding consistent with ingroup favoritism or bias (Smith & Mackie 2000).

Lastly, for the reason that stated Bill's status would help her, the subjects were more likely to think that Nancy would remain in the company for the low benefits and compensation condition than high. This may simply reflect the fact that she needs more help in the low benefits and compensation condition than high one.

The research has several limitations. The dependent measures are perceptions of others' behaviors described in a vignette rather than behavioral responses to actual abusive treatment under varying degrees of dependency. Moreover, the respondents were asked to indicate how they thought someone else would behave. Future research should explicitly ask the subjects to identify with the worker and say how they would respond under the circumstances. Since the age and status variables did not affect the respondents overall judgments of whether the worker would stay or not, future research could examine more extreme and presumably more powerful operationalizations of the concepts.

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