

## Forgiveness and attribution: when abusive supervision enhances performance

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### Abstract:

**Purpose:** While much research shows that abusive supervision reduces employee performance, the purpose of this study is to reverse the lens to question how and under what circumstances abusive supervision leads to enhanced employee performance. The authors argue that the linkages between abusive supervision and employee performance occurs via performance-promotion attributions and that employee levels of dispositional forgiveness alter the relationship between abusive supervision and employee interpretations of abuse, such that more forgiving individuals interpret abuse as more benign behavior designed to help them perform better (i.e. are performance promoting). **Design/methodology/approach:** In a three-wave field survey of 318 employees matched with 89 supervisors, employees completed measures of dispositional forgiveness (Time 1) abusive supervision (Time 1), and performance-promotion attributions of abusive supervision's motives (Time 2). Supervisors rated the job performance of their employees (Time 3). Multilevel structural equation modeling was employed to test a multilevel moderated mediation model. **Findings:** The findings indicate abusive supervision predicts diminished employee performance only when employees are low in dispositional forgiveness, explained by lowered performance-promotion attributions for abusive supervision. **Originality/value:** This study is the first to explore the mechanism (i.e. attribution of abusive supervision's motives to be performance-promoting) and the condition (i.e. employee's high forgiveness) under which abusive supervision may be performance enhancing. It extends the research of abusive supervision on employees' constructive reactions, as well as the effect of dispositional forgiveness on how it reframes employees' attributions of workplace mistreatment.

**Keywords:** abusive personality | job performance | attributions | personality

### Article:

My job is not to be easy on people. My job is to make them better.

— Steve Jobs

### Introduction

In the past two decades, an increased interest has emerged on destructive forms of leadership (Schyns and Schilling, 2013; Krasikova *et al.*, 2013), such as supervisor undermining (e.g. Frazier and Bowler, 2015), leader narcissism (Grijalva *et al.*, 2015), leader psychopathy (Landay *et al.*, 2019), supervisor incivility (Schilpzand *et al.*, 2016) and abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000, 2007). Recent evidence has challenged the conventional thinking that destructive leadership is universally and necessarily negative under all conditions. For example, Grijalva *et al.* (2015) meta-analytical results demonstrate that the relationship between leader narcissism and leadership effectiveness is an inverted *U*-shape, underscoring the potential positive effect of leader narcissism. Lee *et al.* (2013) found a similar effect that abusive supervision is conducive to employee creativity when its level is low to moderate while being detrimental when its level exceeds that threshold.

The potential functional effect of destructive leadership is also echoed by Tepper (2007), who introduced the idea that supervisory abuse may be out of an intent to elicit high performance. Tepper *et al.* (2017) further explicated that abusive supervision can be performance enhancing. Abusive supervision, the most widely studied form of destructive leadership (Schyns and Schilling, 2013; Mackey *et al.*, 2019), is defined as “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). Thus, we focus on the phenomenon of abusive supervision while aiming to contribute to this line of research by theorizing and testing how and when abusive supervision may enhance employee performance.

Specifically, in this research we draw on the attribution perspective (Heider, 1958; Kelley and Michela, 1980), which purports that people's interpretations and understandings of the causes of behavior shape their judgments and responses. Although abusive supervision is typically viewed as harmful, drawing on the attribution perspective (Heider, 1958; Kelley and Michela, 1980) allows us to consider the possibility that some individuals may view an abusive supervisor's behavior as an attempt to motivate or improve employee job performance (Tepper, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2012). More specifically, our research draws on research that suggests that employee individual differences shape and change how individuals perceive or react to the world (e.g. Heider, 1958; Kelley and Michela, 1980). For example, individual differences in conscientiousness and agreeableness change how people respond to supervisor abuse or harm (Mawritz *et al.*, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2015).

In this research we draw on forgiveness literature (e.g. Berry *et al.*, 2001; Thompson *et al.*, 2005) and argue that the role of *dispositional forgiveness* should be particularly important in shaping and changing employees' attributions of the supervisor's motives behind abusive behaviors, and thereby their subsequent job performance. Dispositional forgiveness is defined as a general tendency to forgive other people for offenses across time and different situations (Berry *et al.*, 2001; Thompson *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, dispositional forgiveness has shown to play an important role in determining victims attitudinal and behavioral responses to hostility and aggression in nonwork contexts (Weinberg *et al.*, 2014). We purport that dispositional forgiveness shapes employees' attributions of, and subsequent reactions to, abusive supervision.

By exploring these ideas, the current study makes important contributions to the literature. First, this research reexamines the predominant assumption that the destructive forms of leadership,

including abusive supervision, are invariably negative. Drawing on an attribution perspective, we shed light on the important role of attributions in explaining the relationship between abusive supervision and employee job performance. We show that making a positive attribution of an abusive supervisor's motives (i.e. interpreting abuse as intended to motivate and promote performance) is critical in understanding whether abusive supervision relates to employee performance. Second, while prior research has suggested that employees' reactions to abusive supervision might be affected by their personalities (Brees *et al.*, 2016; Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007; Tepper *et al.*, 2001), we identify the important role dispositional forgiveness plays in determining the positive attributions of supervisory abuse and subsequent performance improvement. Thus, we extend research on dispositional forgiveness by revealing its importance on the attitudinal and behavioral responses in the context of workplace abuse, beyond its commonly studied role in promoting well-being generally (e.g. Kaleta and Mróz, 2018; Lawler-Row and Piferi, 2006).

## **Theoretical background**

### The attribution perspective

Attribution theory (Kelley and Michela, 1980) argues that people make causal explanations for an event or behavior. These causal attributions, in turn, shape judgments and behavioral responses (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973; Kelley and Michela, 1980). Gilbert *et al.* (1988) suggested that the attribution process usually includes three steps: categorize the behavior, characterize the actor in trait term and then correct that inference with information about the situational constraints. The first two stages need fewer attentional resources and they often happen automatically, and the third requires additional mental resources to result in corrected attributions. Applying this to the current research context, we argue that when experiencing abusive behaviors from the supervisors, employees naturally seek causal reasons behind such behaviors. Specifically, their first stage of this sense-making process is to categorize the behaviors as supervisory abuse, and the second stage assumes that a person's behaviors are due to something about the person, (e.g. my supervisor is evil so he or she is abusing me), and then people adjust this attribution by considering more contextual factors in the third stage (e.g. my supervisor warns me about my performance). Given that abuse may sometimes be used by supervisors as a strategic action to warn poor performers and encourage them to improve their performance (Tepper, 2007), once these behaviors are interpreted by employees as such, employees may enhance their performance.

## **Hypotheses development**

### Performance-promotion attributions for abusive supervision

Extant literature has generally assumed that supervisors engage in abusive behaviors to initiate injury or psychologically hurt employees (Mackey *et al.*, 2017). However, Tepper (2007) introduced the idea that abusive supervisors' intent may not be to cause harm but to elicit high performance. This idea is cognizant of Steve Jobs' quote introduced in the beginning of this paper. Since then, other scholars have built on this idea and coined the construct *performance-*

*promotion attributions* (Liu *et al.*, 2012) to capture attributions of abusive supervision's motives that focus on enhancing employees' performance.

The role of performance-promotion attributions of abusive supervision has been empirically tested in a few studies. For example, Liu *et al.* (2012) found that attributing abusive supervision's motives to be more performance-promotion weakened the negative relationship between abusive supervision and team member creativity. This finding is complemented by findings from Fiset *et al.* (2019; Study 2), who experimentally contrasted performance-promotion attribution of abusive supervision's motives, injury initiation attribution of abusive supervision's motives and a neutral (no harm) condition. They found that although both attribution conditions predicted lower creativity and performance quality compared to the neutral (no harm) condition, performance-promotion attribution predicted a higher level of performance outcomes.

Together, these studies suggest that performance-promotion attribution may be one of the mechanisms to understand the performance-related consequences of abusive supervision. In the present study, we suggest that a subordinate making a performance-promotion attribution of abusive supervision's motives may view the intentions of supervisory abuse as abrasive rather than abusive (i.e. as “tough love”). Thus, a performance-promotion attribution of abusive supervision's motives should enable subordinates to act in ways that are consistent with these positive attributions, leading them to improve their work performance. In other words, for abusive supervision to have a performance-enhancing effect, one of the key prerequisite explanatory mechanisms is for the employee to make a performance-promotion attribution of abusive supervision's motives. As such, we expect that performance-promotion attribution be an underlying mechanism linking abusive supervision and employee performance. Specifically, we posit that:

*H1.* The positive relationship between abusive supervision and employee job performance is indirect via a performance-promotion attribution of abusive supervision's motives.

### The moderating role of dispositional forgiveness

While scholars have recently been more receptive to the idea that abusive supervision can be motivating and performance enhancing (e.g. Tepper *et al.*, 2017), there is still a dearth of research that explores the conditions under which abusive supervision may have positive effects (cf. Mackay *et al.*, 2017). The lack of support in research findings may be due to an overlooked boundary condition in this process. In this research, we explore dispositional forgiveness as a possible critical boundary condition that alters people's attributions for abusive supervision. Specifically, we suggest that dispositional forgiveness (sometimes called forgivingness; Berry *et al.*, 2001) can help elucidate when and why abusive supervision links to performance-promotion attributions and subsequent enhanced performance.

Dispositional forgiveness is a trait that distinguishes people on a spectrum of forgivingness across different times, situations and offenses (Thompson *et al.*, 2005), and it represents a general response style that reframes peoples' interpretations of interpersonal offenses (McCulough *et al.*, 2000). We theorize that dispositional forgiveness shapes people's attributions

of negative events, such as abusive supervision. Some research supports the general idea that dispositional forgiveness shapes attributions of transgressions in the state forgiveness literature: compared to victims low in forgiveness, victims high in forgiveness tend to have higher empathy for the transgressors (McCullough *et al.*, 1998; Worthington *et al.*, 2007), make more positive appraisals of their transgressors (Bradfield and Aquino, 1999; Struthers *et al.*, 2008) and ruminate less about their mistreatment (McCullough *et al.*, 2000, 2001).

Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that dispositional forgiveness provides precious extra mental resources to help individuals make sense of the aggressor's behaviors when their resources are depleted due to mistreatment. For example, Egan and Todorov (2009) found that forgiveness can act as an effective coping resource to cope with school bullying. Similarly, Weinberg *et al.* (2014) found that dispositional forgiveness can serve as an internal mental resource to help injured victims of terror attacks to effectively cope with posttraumatic symptoms. In the current study, we argue that subordinates with a high level of dispositional forgiveness energize themselves with extra mental resources, so that they will make a cognitive and emotional effort to reframe and redefine supervisory abuse, while considering other external or contextual factors (e.g. encourage better job performance) as plausible causes of supervisory abuse. Thus, dispositional forgiveness should capture a general inclination to make more positive attributions about an offender's behavior. Accordingly, those high in dispositional forgiveness should be willing and able to consider the potential positive reasons for why an offense occurred and consider that abusive supervision could be motivated by supervisors' "tough love" to make them better. Integrating the above, we contend that the relationship between abusive supervision and performance-promotion attribution is contingent on employee's levels of dispositional forgiveness. We hypothesize that

*H2.* The relationship between abusive supervision and performance-promotion attribution is moderated by dispositional forgiveness, such that abusive supervision engenders higher level of performance-promotion attribution of supervisor's motives for employees with high (rather than low) dispositional forgiveness.

Taken together, we argue that abusive supervision's effect on employee performance can be explained by a performance-promotion attribution, and that this indirect effect is altered by the role of employee's dispositional forgiveness. Specifically, we suggest that employees with high dispositional forgiveness inclinations, compared to those with low dispositional forgiveness inclinations, will interpret supervisory abuse as intended to promote performance ("tough love"), which, in turn, will lead to enhanced employee performance. Our expectations form a moderated mediation framework in which the link between abusive supervision and employee job performance is mediated by performance-promotion attributions of abuse, while being moderated by dispositional forgiveness. We hypothesize that

*H3.* Dispositional forgiveness will moderate the indirect effect of abusive supervision on employee job performance through performance-promotion attribution, such that the indirect effect is more positive for employees with high (rather than low) dispositional forgiveness.

## Method

### Sample and procedure

We collected multiwave multisource data from a large chemical engineering company in northern China. At Time 1, *employees* rated their dispositional forgiveness and abusive supervision. At Time 2 (one month later), *employees* reported their level of performance-promotion attributions of abusive supervision's motives. At Time 3 (one month after Time 2), *supervisors* rated their subordinates' job performance. After removing unmatched and missing responses across time-points and excluding the random responding cases, the final sample consisted of 318 employees (response rate = 56.78%) and 89 supervisors (response rate = 79.46%).<sup>1</sup> Demographics for the final sample are as follows: 68% men; 32% women;  $M = 26.07$  years old ( $SD = 5.75$  years);  $M = 2.54$  years working for the company ( $SD = 2.20$  years). We translated the survey from English into Chinese using back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1986).

### Measures

*Abusive supervision (Time 1,  $\alpha = 0.92$ )*. We measured employees' perceptions of abusive supervision using a modified 11-item scale developed by Tepper (2000).<sup>2</sup> Employees were asked to rate their supervisors using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "1" ("I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me") to "5" ("He/she uses this behavior very often with me").

*Dispositional forgiveness (Time 1,  $\alpha = 0.74$ )*. Dispositional forgiveness was measured using a modified 3-item *dispositional forgiveness of others* scale developed by Thompson *et al.* (2005). The anchors ranged from "1" (strongly disagree) to "7" (strongly agree).

*Performance-promotion attributions of abusive supervision's motives (Time 2,  $\alpha = 0.85$ )*. We measured performance-promotion attributions by a 5-item scale developed by Liu *et al.* (2012). The anchors ranged from "1" (strongly disagree) to "7" (strongly agree).

*Job performance. (Time 3,  $\alpha = 0.75$ )*. Supervisors rated their subordinates' *job performance* using a 5-item measure adapted from Janssen (2001). The anchors ranged from "1" (strongly disagree) to "7" (strongly agree).

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<sup>1</sup> We assessed inattentive responding using a response pattern approach using intra-individual response variability (IRV) (Dunn *et al.*, 2018; Meade and Craig, 2012) in which the standard deviation of each individual's responses across the Time 1 survey (11 items of abusive supervision and 3 items of dispositional forgiveness), and lower score on the IRV values indicated a higher level of random responding. Based on a computation of the maximum number of items with a similar response pattern, we detected two participants may have responded inattentively. We compared our results with and without these participants and the results were the same. Therefore, we removed these participants in our analyses.

<sup>2</sup> We used a modified scale to measure abusive supervision upon running an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to examine the factor structure of all the measurement items. The results showed that Tepper's (2000) abusive supervision items #1, #2, #7, #8 loaded on a different factor aside from the theoretically proposed factor. We carefully examined the linguistic semantics of these items and found that there may appear a different factor. Therefore, we deleted these items from the original measure, resulting in a 11-item scale used in the current study.

## Analytical strategy

Employees in this study were nested within teams; thus, the data are hierarchical (number of employees per supervisor in the final sample = 3.59 on average). We calculated the intraclass correlation coefficients (Bliese, 2000) and found that 41.3% of the variance in job performance are explained by group membership. To avoid inflated effect sizes and spurious findings (Kreft and De Leeuw, 1998), we used two-level analysis clustering around supervisor by estimating two models (i.e. multilevel mediation model for Hypothesis 1 and multilevel moderated mediation model for Hypotheses 2 and 3) in Mplus 7.11 (Muthén and Muthén, 2012). All explanatory variables in our models were grand mean centered (Kreft and De Leeuw, 1998; Bliese *et al.*, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Finally, we controlled for age, gender and job tenure given their links to abusive supervision and employee job performance in prior research (e.g. Farh and Chen, 2014).

## Results

### Confirmatory factor analyses

We conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to assess the discriminant validity of the measures. Table 1 shows good model fit ( $\chi^2(246) = 604.99, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.053, \text{ and } RMSEA = 0.068$ ) for the hypothesized 4-factor model which is preferred to several alternative models. Table 2 reports means, standard deviations and correlations of the study variables.

**Table 1.** Comparison of measurement models in the study

Models	Factors	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
1	Four factors: Abusive supervision, dispositional forgiveness, performance-promotion attribution, job performance	604.99	246		0.068	0.910	0.900	0.053
2	Three factors: Dispositional forgiveness, job performance, and combined abusive supervision and performance-promotion attributions into another factor	1523.07	249	918.08	0.127	0.679	0.644	0.120
3	Two factors: Job performance, and combined abusive supervision, performance-promotion attributions and dispositional forgiveness into another factor	2816.58	251	2211.59	0.179	0.354	0.290	0.236
4	One factor: Combined all variables into one factor	Model did not converge						

<sup>3</sup> We choose to use grand-mean centering based on several reasons. First, group mean centering is particularly relevant when there is cross-level interaction hypothesized, and our model is not the case (Bliese *et al.*, 2018). Second, group mean indicated the model emphasized the group referent, and focused on whether an individual's position relative to his/her group members is important, and in our model (Bliese *et al.*, 2018), we did not focus on the group referent and comparisons with other group members. Instead, we are interested in understanding how the level of abusive supervision and dispositional forgiveness interplayed to affect the outcomes.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations for the focal variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Abusive Supervision <sup>a</sup>	1.30	0.53	(0.92)					
2 Performance-Promotion Attribution <sup>b</sup>	5.09	1.13	-0.03	(0.85)				
3 Dispositional Forgiveness <sup>a</sup>	5.52	1.05	-0.01	0.08	(0.74)			
4 Job Performance <sup>c</sup>	5.58	0.83	-0.11*	0.19**	0.05	(0.75)		
5 Age	26.07	5.75	-0.11	0.09	0.15**	0.08		
6 Gender	0.68	0.47	0.01	0.13*	-0.18*	-0.01	-0.08	
7 Job Tenure	2.54	2.20	-0.03	0.06	0.12*	0.05	0.45**	0.06

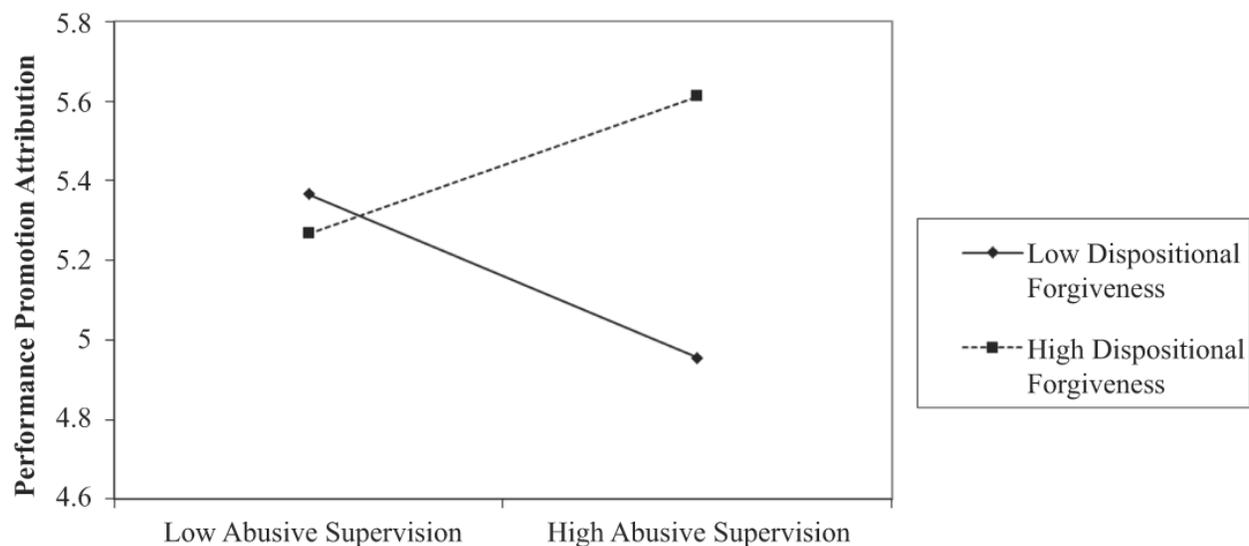
**Notes:**  $N = 318$ . <sup>a</sup> measured at Time 1; <sup>b</sup> measured at Time 2; <sup>c</sup> rated by supervisors at Time 3. Reliabilities are in parentheses on the diagonal

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

### Tests of hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 predicted that performance-promotion attributions mediated the relationship between abusive supervision and job performance. Estimation of a multilevel mediation model shows that the relationship between abusive supervision and performance-promotion attribution is not significant ( $b = -0.05$ ,  $se = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.82$ ), although the relationship between performance-promotion attribution and job performance is significant ( $b = 0.10$ ,  $se = 0.042$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). While Hypothesis 1 was not supported, these results suggest potential moderators in the relationship between abusive supervision and performance-promotion attribution.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that dispositional forgiveness moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and performance-promotion attribution. The results supported a significant interaction ( $b = 0.33$ ,  $se = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The nature of the interaction is depicted in Figure 1. In support of Hypothesis 2, the relation between abusive supervision and performance-promotion attribution is positive and significant (simple slope = 0.31,  $p = 0.03$ , one-tail test) when employees are highly forgiving (+1SD), while negative and significant when employees are less forgiving (simple slope =  $-0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.



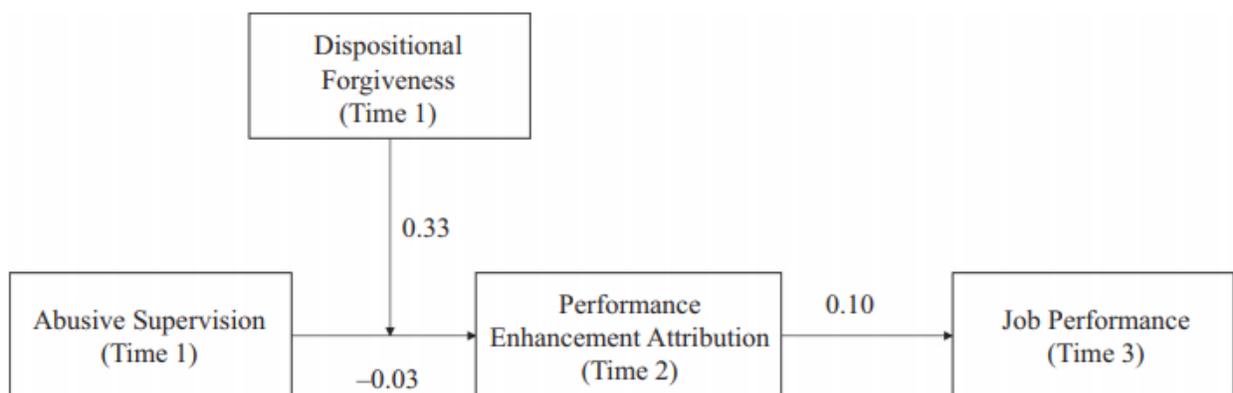
**Figure 1.** Moderating effect of forgiveness on the relationship between abusive supervision and performance-promotion attribution

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the indirect effect of abusive supervision on employee job performance via performance-promotion attributions would be moderated by employee's dispositional forgiveness. We followed the recommendations by Preacher *et al.* (2007) and calculated the indirect effect at low and high levels of the moderator  $\pm 1 SD$ . We used a Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications to construct confidence intervals around the estimated indirect effects across different levels of the moderator to provide precise indirect effect estimates at varying levels of the moderator (Preacher *et al.*, 2007). Our results (see Table 3) suggest that the indirect effect of abusive supervision on job performance through performance-promotion attributions was negative at low levels of dispositional forgiveness (coefficient estimate =  $-0.029$ , 95% CI  $[-0.092, -0.001]$ , 90% CI  $[-0.081, -0.005]$ ), while positive at high levels of dispositional forgiveness (coefficient estimate =  $0.022$ , 95% CI  $[-0.002, 0.083]$ , 90% CI  $[0.001, 0.072]$ ). Finally, the confidence intervals for the difference in the conditional indirect effects excluded zero (difference in indirect effect =  $0.051$ , 95% CI  $[0.001, 0.138]$ ; 90% CI  $[0.018, 0.125]$ ). Thus, in support of the first-stage moderated mediation model (Hypothesis 3), individuals with higher dispositional forgiveness, compared to lower dispositional forgiveness, were more likely to see the motives of abusive supervision as performance-promoting, and such attributions were positively related to job performance. The final model is depicted in Figure 2.

**Table 3.** Moderated mediation results across levels of dispositional forgiveness

Moderator	Level	Job performance		
		Conditional Indirect effect	Lower bound Confidence interval	Upper bound Confidence interval
Dispositional Forgiveness	High	0.022	-0.002 (0.001)	0.083 (0.072)
	Low	-0.029	-0.092 (-0.081)	-0.001 (-0.005)
	Difference	0.051	0.001 (0.018)	0.138 (0.125)

**Notes:**  $N = 318$ . Moderated mediation is supported when the confidence interval for the difference in the conditional indirect effects excludes zero. Values in the table are associated with the 95th percentile, while values in parenthesis are computed at the 90th percentile



**Notes:** Unstandardized coefficients were presented. 318 individuals were nested within 89 different supervisors. We used two-level path modeling procedures to simultaneously account for the nested data structure

**Figure 2.** Results for the proposed model

## Discussion

The present findings suggest that employees' interpretation of the supervisors' motives (i.e. whether the motive of abusive supervision is performance-promoting) is important to determine employees' reactions – and that benign attributions are based, at least in part, on employee levels of dispositional forgiveness. Namely, we found those with low dispositional forgiveness were not likely to perceive abusive supervision as intended to promote employee performance, while those with higher levels of dispositional forgiveness attribute the motives of abusive supervision to be performance-promoting and enhanced their subsequent job performance.

### Theoretical contributions

Our research contributes to research on abusive supervision and dispositional forgiveness in the following ways. First, the current study offers new insights into the potential functional effect of destructive leadership. Using abusive supervision as one specific type of destructive leadership, we found that abusive supervision predicts positive employee job performance under the boundary condition of higher levels of dispositional forgiveness (as it helps shape performance-promotion attributions). This contributes to scholar's thinking about the plausible benefits of destructive leadership in general and abusive supervision in particular that have been only theoretically proposed or meta-analytically implied (Mackey *et al.*, 2019; Tepper *et al.*, 2017). As a caveat, we wish to note that our findings do not imply that abusive supervision is necessarily a constructive process. Indeed, the predominant field shows that abusive supervision is largely negative – and not something that should be encouraged or developed in organizations. Our hope in conducting this research is that it encourages future research on the boundary conditions for when and why abusive supervision is not necessarily negative, thereby building on the contingency perspective of destructive leadership (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007).

Second, we shed light on the central role of dispositional forgiveness in the context of abusive supervision. By showing that dispositional forgiveness is a central variable that shapes whether abusive supervision is viewed as performance enhancing versus performance diminishing, we show that dispositional forgiveness matters in the context of workplace mistreatment. In particular, our findings suggest that dispositional forgiveness shapes whether abusive supervision is perceived as “warning message” for undesirable performance. On top of that, we contribute to research that has begun to explore how employees' personalities shape their reactions to abusive supervision (Nandkeolyar *et al.*, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2015).

Third, our findings may also shed light on the research of the broader term of dark side phenomenon in the organization such as workplace incivility, bullying or victimization. For example, workplace incivility, defined as “low intensity deviant acts, such as rude and discourteous verbal and nonverbal behaviors enacted towards another organizational member with ambiguous intent to harm” (Andersson and Pearson, 1999), may be informed by our findings. However, workplace incivility differs from abusive supervision in several ways. First, workplace incivility are behaviors conducted by all possible entities in the workplace including coworkers whereas supervision is conducted by the supervisor only. Second, the target/victim of workplace incivility could be any organizational members, whereas the target of abusive supervision is only subordinates. Third, workplace incivility's intent to harm is ambiguous – it can be to impose harm or it can have no intention at all (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Blau and Andersson, 2005), while one of the intents of abusive supervision has been identified as sending

warning messages for undesirable behaviors and motivating subordinate to improve their performance (Tepper, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2012). Together, we call for more studies on how forgiveness impacts employees' coping with destructive leadership or workplace mistreatment more broadly.

### Practical implications

The practical implication of our findings is that organizations need to be cognizant of employee forgiveness tendencies. While it is not feasible to hire employees based on dispositional forgiveness, organizations may wish to foster a climate of forgiveness through forgiveness interventions training so that employees can better cope with such “tough love” in the workplace. However, we are by no means encouraging or tolerating abusive supervision. Instead, we demonstrate that the motives behind an offender matters, and recommend that organizations make hiring and promoting decisions with caution. On the one hand, organizations should value managers who act harshly out of an altruistic intention. On the other hand, it is important to hire employees whose personality traits allow them to be more resilient toward supervisory mistreatment or punishment. Thus, it is important for the supervisor to understand and consider employee individual differences when providing negative feedback.

We should note that by no means do our findings suggest abusive supervision is good or should be encouraged. Instead, our findings suggest that employees' interpretations for supervisor's abusive behavior matter and that supervisors should be cognizant of such differences. For example, it may be important to hire employees whose personality traits allow them to be more resilient toward supervisory mistreatment or punishment. Alternatively, organization may wish to foster a “forgiveness” culture to encourage benign attributions for negative supervisor behavior. Finally, it is important for supervisors to understand and consider employee's forgiveness tendencies when providing any type of negative performance feedback.

### Limitations and future directions

Our findings should be interpreted considering a few limitations. First, while we obtained data at three different time periods, separated by a one-month time lag, as well as from two different sources (employees and supervisors), the current research design does not allow inferences regarding the causality among abusive supervision, dispositional forgiveness and employee performance. Additionally, our research took a snapshot of how abusive supervision could affect employee performance, while from a dynamic perspective, the relationship between abusive supervision and employee performance may be a complicated ongoing interactive spiral. For example, prior studies have shown that poor performers attracted more abusive supervision (Tepper *et al.*, 2011; Liang *et al.*, 2016), whereas other scholars also identified that high performers can also become targets of abusive supervision because they posed a threat to the hierarchy (Khan *et al.*, 2018). We believe it is of great importance for future research to further investigate the relationship between abusive supervision and performance via a longitudinal design.

Second, the current study focused on performance-promotion attribution as the mechanism that explains why abusive supervision may potentially enhance employee performance. We chose

this specific type of attribution and left the injury initiation attribution out because we aimed to demonstrate a positive link between performance-promotion attribution and actual performance enhancement. It is worthwhile for future studies to identify plausible outcomes (such as health-related outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion or anxiety) that are pertinent to an injury initiation attribution, while exploring other types of personality and individual differences (such as humility and narcissism) that may affect employee's interpretation of the motives of abusive supervision.

## Conclusion

The current study has identified dispositional forgiveness as a critical individual difference that shapes employees' attributions of the motives of abusive supervision. Abusive supervision was found to predict enhanced employee performance when employees were highly forgiving and diminished work performance when employees were highly not forgiving. Such findings hold promise for better understanding how and when abusive supervision may produce constructive outcomes in the workplace.

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