Abusive Supervision in the Armed Forces

Bad Character and Leadership: Exploring the Consequences of Abusive Supervision in the Armed Forces

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Abstract

Leaders have the potential to be the agents of virtue or vice in organizations because they shape and influence the collective moral character of the organization. As such, we believe that the study of bad character, as a complement to the study of virtue, has value for leadership education and development. This research presents a causal model which lists the factors necessary for the perception of abusive supervision by military subordinates and the likely consequences of those perceptions and discusses the factors which might lead to outcomes for subordinates exposed to this form of destructive leader behavior.

"*Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one.*"

This quote from the *Meditations* of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus seems to suggest that the essential elements of good character were known nearly 2000 years ago; all that remained for those who aspired to leadership was to develop the habits of behavior necessary to act accordingly. Leadership programs today, including those in use in the armed forces, continue to emphasize the development of leaders of (good) character (e.g., Avolio, 2005; Bass, 1990; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Berkowitz, 2002; Day, 2009; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; McCauley &Van Velsor, 2005; Wakin, 2009). Though debate about the elements necessary for the formation of good character extends at least as far back as Aristotle's *Nichomacean Ethics* and Plato's *Meno* (Huitt, 2004), character development education has traditionally focused on learning and doing the *right* things (Nucci, 1989; Wright & Huang, 2008). Is there anything to be learned, then, from leaders who exhibit bad character and do the wrong things?

Leaders have the potential to be the agents of virtue or vice in organizations (Nuebert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonko, 2009) because they shape and influence the collective moral character of the organization (Wright & Goodstein, 2007). Ultimately, their choices, good or bad, have consequences for organizational participants and stakeholders. As such, we believe that the study of bad character, as a complement to the study of virtue, has value for leadership education and development. During the past two decades, there has been ample evidence of bad character, as continuing revelations of wrongdoing by high-profile and once trusted business and governmental leaders demonstrate (Conroy & Emerson, 2008). Perhaps

as a consequence, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to the negative aspects of leadership behavior and influence in organizations (e.g., Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007; Nuebert, et al., 2009). Of all the paths that this focus might lead to, one prominent stream of research is devoted to examining destructive leader behavior within the supervisor–subordinate dyad: abusive supervision (Ashforth, 1997; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Schat, Desmarais, & Kelloway, 2006; Powell, 1998; Tepper, 2000; 2007). We frame this discussion within the unique context of leadership in the armed forces to explore the differential effects that this, or any other high-power differentiated context, may hold for affected individuals and organizations.

A Model of Abusive Supervision in the Armed Forces

It is possible that some leaders operating in our organizations (including leaders in the armed forces) are not only ineffective, but also harmful to their organizations and participants. A growing body of literature explores the causes and consequences of nonphysical destructive supervisor behaviors, and although they do not share the same labels, they all involve various forms of workplace hostility. These destructive supervisor behaviors have been called "petty tyranny" (Ashforth, 1994, 1997; Bies & Tripp, 1998), "emotional abuse" (Keashly, 1998), "abusive behavior" (Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994), "social undermining" (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), negative mentoring experiences (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000) and "bullying" (Harvey, Treadway, Heames, & Duke, 2009; Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999), among other things. In an attempt to provide a greater degree of conceptual clarity, Tepper (2000) synthesized the various construct definitions to arrive at a more distinct description of this class of behaviors.

Tepper (2000, 2007) defines abusive supervision as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (178). This construct is distinct from other forms of workplace deviant behavior (e.g., sexual harassment, supervisor physical aggression) in that it 1) concerns behavior that is directed toward subordinates over a long term, 2) excludes physical hostility, and 3) does not include reference to intended outcomes (Tepper, 2000, 2007). Keashly, Trott, and MacLean (1994) described abusive supervisor behavior as angry outbursts, public ridiculing, taking credit for subordinate successes, and scapegoating subordinates. Bies (2000) described abusive supervision as consisting of public criticism, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions, and coercion. Ashforth (1994) described the tyranny of abusive supervision as managers using authority or position for personal gain, belittling subordinates, acting rudely toward them, and administering organizational policies unfairly. Tepper, Duffy, Henle, and Lambert (2006) estimated the cost of abusive supervision in U.S. corporations at $23.8 billion annually. Clearly, bad character, in the form of abusive supervision, is associated with significant negative consequences.

In order to understand the consequences of abusive supervision in the armed forces, it is first necessary to present a theoretical model which lists the factors

necessary for the perception of abusive supervision by military subordinates and the likely consequences of those perceptions and discusses the factors which might lead to outcomes for subordinates exposed to this form of destructive leader behavior. Our model of abusive supervision in the armed forces is presented as Figure 1.

This model builds on the emergent model of abusive supervision presented by Tepper (2007, p. 279) by offering a number of theoretical adjustments. At the present time, there have been only three empirical examinations of abusive supervision antecedents (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Tepper et al., 2006), and Tepper (2007) suggests that all three support the concept of displaced aggression as the proximate cause of abusive supervision. We disagree with this rather narrow explanation of causality. We do agree with Tepper (2007) that more research is needed to explore the individual difference factors (e.g., personality variables), work context factors, and industry factors that are the likely causes of supervisor abusive behavior. In the present context, we would argue that work environment and "industry" norms may lead to the increased incidence of abusive behaviors in military organizations. For example, the use of abusive language and behaviors in front-line units may be ubiquitous, while the unique processes associated with recruit training and socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) may cause mission-focused military professionals to resort to abusive behaviors more readily than do their organizational counterparts in business and government. Divestiture socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), as practiced in basic training in the armed forces, attempts to tear down the individual and rebuild that person into a socialized ideal. It is well suited to the military service, as it can foster commitment, teamwork, and solidarity. Such training should not be confused with abusive behavior. Training can be challenging

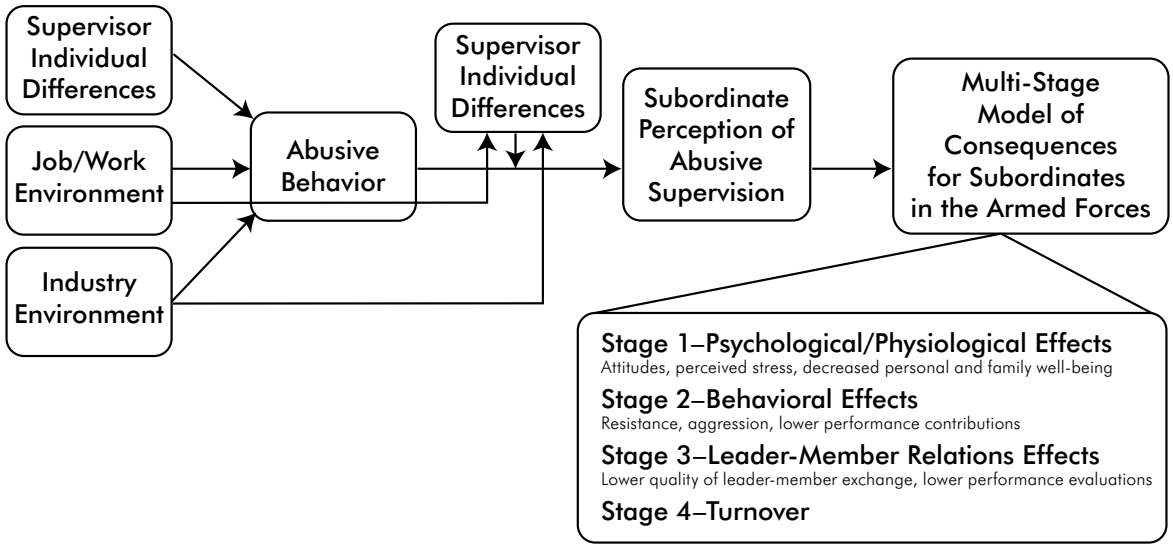

Figure 1
Model of Abusive Supervision in the Armed Forces

and stressful without necessitating abusive language or behaviors. However, Hunter and Bandow (2009) suggest that poor treatment of subordinates may be seen as acceptable in organizations characterized by high power distance between supervisors and subordinates (such as military organizations).

We believe that some individuals may perceive a higher incidence of abusive supervision than others because, like other forms of social influence in organizations (e.g., Lewin, 1951), the experience of abusive supervision is subjective and personal (Tepper, 2000). While individual differences, work environment, and industry factors might influence supervisor abusive behavior, we also believe that these factors could serve as moderators of subordinate perceptions of abusive behavior. Therefore, we expect perceptions of abusive supervision to mediate the relationship between abusive behaviors and outcomes. Said another way, absent the belief by the subordinate that the supervisor has engaged in "a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors," the negative outcomes suggested by Tepper's (2007) emergent model of abusive supervision would be less probable.

A Multi-Stage Model of Consequences for Subordinates in the Armed Forces

Tepper (2007) presents a number of likely consequences of abusive supervision, and previous research confirms the general linkages presented in that model. Ashforth (1997) found that tyrannical supervision led to frustration, helplessness, and alienation from the work. Tepper (2000) found that abusive supervision was associated with lower job and life satisfaction, lower normative and affective commitment, work–family conflict, and increased job stress. Richman, Flaherty, Rospenda, and Christensen (1992) found that abusive supervision led to increased dissatisfaction and increased job stress. Duffy et al. (2002) found that social undermining (a form of abusive supervision) led to negative outcomes for individuals, including unfavorable attitudes toward the job and aggressive behavior. We believe that the outcomes associated with perceptions of abusive supervision can best be viewed as a multi-stage causal sequence of reactions and behaviors. In doing so, we implicitly incorporate a temporal dimension to account for the progressive development of more severe outcomes over time.

Stage one outcomes (psychological/physiological effects) include changes in attitudes following the experience of abusive supervision and subsequent effects on personal and family psychological/physiological well-being. Tepper (2000) suggested that the injustices associated with the perception of abusive supervision would lead to changes in work attitudes, including job dissatisfaction and reduced affective and normative organizational commitment (Schat et al., 2006; Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2004). Additionally, abusive supervision is considered to be a very substantial workplace stressor (Burton & Hoobler, 2006), and stressors have been shown to lead to negative psychological (Beehr, 1995), physiological (Beehr and Glazer, 2001), and behavioral outcomes (Beehr, 1995; Jackson and Schuler, 1985). Francis and Barling (2005) found that perceptions of workplace injustice were associated with significant occupational strain (felt stress), and Giacalone and Promislo (2010) suggested that repeated episodes of procedural injustice, such as those associated with prolonged

verbal and nonverbal hostility, were associated with increased stress responses and deleterious effects on morbidity and mortality. Bryant, Buttigieg, and Hanley (2009) documented substantial negative effects on personal as well as family well-being (psychological and physiological). Tepper (2000) found that the increased stress and unfavorable attitudes associated with abusive supervision could be mitigated by subordinate perceptions of job mobility; in the case of military subordinates, the lack of mobility would increase the degree of strain felt by abused subordinates and exacerbate the effects on job attitudes. In summary, the experience of abusive supervision is associated with anxiety (Harris, Kacmar, & Boonthanum, 2005; Keashly et al., 1994), depression (Tepper, 2000), diminished self-efficacy (Duffy et al., 2002), poor health and well-being (Giacalone & Promislo, 2010; Schat et al., 2006), and negative work attitudes (Duffy et al., 2002; Schat et al., 2006; Tepper et al., 2004).

Stage two outcomes (behavioral effects) are purported to be the result of stage one effects. Tepper, Duffy, and Shaw (2001) found that the experience of abusive supervision was associated with subordinate resistance to supervisor requests. Bamberger and Bacharach (2006) found that abusive supervision was associated with increased problem drinking. Bies and Tripp (1998) and Duffy et al. (2002) found that abused subordinates would often undermine their bosses in private and would occasionally ridicule or challenge them in public. Hunter and Bandow (2009) suggested that abusive behavior by supervisors encouraged subordinates to retaliate, and Schat et al. (2006) found that abusive supervision was associated with increased subordinate aggressive behaviors. Zellars, Tepper, and Duffy (2002) and Aryee, Chen, Sun, and Debrah (2007) found that abusive supervision was associated with lower levels of subordinate organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). Harris, Kacmar, and Zivnuska (2007) found that abusive supervision was associated with lower self- and leader-rated job performance. Finally, Bryant et al. (2009) found that abusive supervision was associated with increased absenteeism. Clearly, the experience of abusive supervision causes subordinates to react and behave in a number of ways that detract from effective organizational functioning.

It is in stage three that we feel the consequences of abusive supervision are most keenly felt in military organizations. Burton and Hoobler (2006) summed up the circumstances this way: "Because bosses are commonly the gatekeepers to employee advancement, compensation, and feedback, when this relationship is a dysfunctional one, it stands to have particularly salient and devastating consequences for employees" (341). We believe that the consequences of abusive supervision (the subsequent psychological/physiological and behavioral effects) damage the quality of leader member exchange and dramatically alter supervisor subordinate relationships. Ashforth (1997) found that leader support for, and endorsement of, subordinates was substantially reduced in abusive relationships. In a military environment, the supervisor is the primary gatekeeper to employee advancement in that yearly performance evaluation reports have significant effects on promotions and continuation, assignment choice, and a number of other salient career-related outcomes. If the quality of leader–member relations is low, it is likely that

the abusive supervisor will use this as the rationale for lower performance ratings.

The multi-stage model ends with a discussion of turnover. Tepper (2000) found that abusive supervision was associated with increased intentions to quit. Such a result is not particularly surprising, as turnover intentions are widely understood to be associated with negative workplace phenomena (Tett & Meyer, 2006). Typically, however, the turnover intentions are a result of the subordinate's perception that the job or work environment no longer meets their needs. In most organizations, the decision to leave is a personal decision based on an assessment of many factors. In the case of military subordinates, the considerations include all of the above, but also include the notion that decreased leader–member relations that lead to lower performance evaluations create the conditions wherein the subordinate may have little choice but to leave the armed forces. In other words, since the military employs an "up or out" promotion system, individuals do not have the opportunity to wait for another supervisor to replace the abusive supervisor; performance reports are part of the permanent record and affect promotions and assignment choices. An individual with a less than stellar performance report may realize that his/her longevity in the armed forces is in jeopardy and, given the opportunity, will leave the service before being dismissed for non-promotion. To make matters worse, military members are not usually in a position to give their employer the typical two weeks' notice before leaving the organization. Instead, they are required to serve out the remainder of their enlistment or active duty service commitment. This may entail staying with the organization for several additional years before departing. It is likely that the inability to leave once the decision is made will have a negative spillover effect in the other areas mentioned.

Discussion and Implications

Powell (1998) coined the term "the abusive organization" to describe environments where abusive supervisors reside, and while we do not expect that characterization to apply to many organizations, we believe that there are leaders of bad character operating in many organizations today. The experience of abusive supervision may result in what Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, and Toth (1997) refer to as a break in the social contract between employer and employee. Such a break often leads to negative psychological, physiological, and behavioral outcomes.

Applying the model to the military highlights the uniqueness of its environment and mission. Although Tepper (2000, 2007) considers abusive behavior a consequence of the environment experienced by the abusive supervisor, we shift the focus of interest to individual perceptual processes, wherein the work and industry context matter as well. For example, one reason movies such as *Stripes* and *Private Benjamin* are funny to the general public is because these movies depict the experiences of individuals who would not normally self-select being placed in an intense military environment, with a general perception that abusive behavior in the military is commonplace and accepted. To individuals in the military, the experiences of these individuals may be familiar and may or may not be evidence of abusive supervision.

We therefore suggest that members of the military have a different perspective on what is considered abuse than their civilian counterparts do. A certain level of emotional abuse and negative mentoring experiences are typical in basic military training. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many military supervisors use what many would consider to be abusive behaviors as part of rites of passage. It is not uncommon for a military leader to engage in angry outbursts or use foul language in order to encourage a subordinate to "toughen up" or "get with the program." In fact, those individuals who do so are generally considered *good* troops who are ready for increased responsibility. Those who complain or demonstrate negative emotional or behavioral reactions may find themselves marginalized and/or given positions with fewer opportunities for promotion. In this sense, it matters not whether the behavior is abusive per se, but whether or not the subordinate experiences the behavior as abusive.

The model suggests that military leaders should pay close attention to the norms of the military work environment as well as the individual differences of subordinates. There is little doubt that abusive behavior occurs in the military, either by custom or as normatively engendered sets of experiences believed to be part of the military milieu. It may also be a widely shared belief that abusive behavior is tacitly rewarded. If subordinates are rewarded for responding to abusive behavior well, supervisors may well be encouraged to enact abusive behaviors. Reputations precede military leaders, and most military members can easily list several *exemplary* and widely-known abusive leaders. One such individual earned his nickname ("Magic Mike") for making people who displeased him disappear. Word got around that if you upset him and could not handle his abuse, he would get you fired and reassigned to a different military base at *magical* speed.

As the model suggests, abusive supervision has the potential to greatly impact the military mission in negative ways. It bears repeating that leaders shape and influence the collective moral character of the organization. Ultimately, the choice of whether to engage in abusive behaviors or not (e.g., angry outbursts, public ridiculing, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions, coercion, and/or administering organizational policies unfairly) rests with each military leader. Engaged as we are with the global war on terror and its impact on recruiting and retention issues, perhaps it is time for the military to reconsider its approach to the training and development of leaders of character. Understanding abusive behavior and its consequences may help military leaders avoid these behaviors and the correspondingly corrosive environment they engender. Such a perspective might enhance the development of programs that improve the retention of military professionals (Wright & Goodstein, 2007). Ultimately, choices, both good and bad, have consequences for organizational participants and stakeholders. In the present context, we argue that work environment and "industry" norms which lead to the increased incidence of abusive behaviors in military organizations should be revisited, and that each military supervisor should reconsider his or her approach to leadership and the effect they are having on their subordinates. Again, the challenge of Marcus Aurelius rings true: "*Waste no more time arguing what a good leader should be. Be one*."

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