When and How subordinates' worldviews lead to abusive supervision: Integrating motivational goal schema and victim precipitation perspectives

The abusive supervision which 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) is a costly workplace phenomenon. The literature on abusive supervision talks about several factors that predict the occurrence of abusive supervision. Most of the existing studies focused on supervisors' characteristics and situational elements to explore the antecedents of abusive supervision. Far less is known that how subordinates' own cognitions and interpretations of their organizational surroundings may lead to supervisory abuse.

We explored that question by invoking the concepts discussed in the in the motivational goal-schema theory (D'Andrade, 1992; Strauss, 1992) and victim precipitation theory (Elias, 1986). According to D'Andrade (1992) and Strauss (1992), motivational goals are activated for individuals by schema-driven perceptions or interpretation of reality. Such schemas are made highly accessible through cultural socialization which consequently leads to stable interpretation of reality and social world around oneself. By building on these ideas we argue that subordinates' worldviews about the organization and its members result in certain motivational goals which consequently determines his/her attitudes toward the organization and its members. Such attitudes sometimes make subordinates a convenient target for supervisory abuse. We also discuss that the low subordinate's performance is a condition under which this abuse is more likely to happen. And subordinates can safeguard against supervisory abuse by demonstrating high performance. Based on these arguments we made following three hypotheses:

H1 Subordinates' perceptions of dangerous worldview about the organization would be positively related to their authoritarian submission.

H2 There is a positive relationship between subordinates' authoritarian submission and subordinate's perceptions of abusive supervision.

H3 The indirect effect of subordinates' perceptions of dangerous worldview about organization on subordinate's perceptions of abusive supervision through subordinates' authoritarian submission will be more pronounced when supervisor's evaluation of subordinates' performance is low rather than high.

Methods

We distributed survey questionnaires to 250 employees and their supervisors from various organizations. We received a total of 180 employee responses out of 250 surveys (response rate for employee surveys = 72%) and 48 supervisor responses out of 80 surveys (response rate for supervisor surveys = 60%). The survey contained items related to our constructs. All items measured in the survey were anchored to a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), except for subordinate's performance. We adapted six items Altemeyer's (1998) belief in a dangerous world scale to organizational context to measure subordinates' dangerous worldview about the organization. We used four item instrument developed by Funke (2005) for measuring "authoritarian submission" dimension. We used fifteen item scale developed by (Tepper et al., 2011) to measure abusive supervision. Subordinates' performance was measured using four item scale developed by Liden et al. (1993).

Results

The effect of dangerous worldview was significant in predicting subordinate's authoritarian submission perceptions (γ = .19, p < .05), hence hypothesis 1 was supported. Similarly, the effect of authoritarian submission was significant in predicting abusive supervision perceptions (γ = .22, p < .05), hence hypothesis 2 was supported. Hypothesis 3 stated that the indirect effect of subordinates' dangerous worldview (via authoritarian submission) on subordinate's perceptions of abusive supervision vary depending on their performance. The results exhibited that when the subordinate's performance is low, the indirect effect of subordinate's dangerous worldview perceptions on abusive supervision through authoritarian submission was significant (*ab* = .09, CI [.018, .209]). In contrast, the confidence interval related to the indirect effect through authoritarian submission was insignificant when subordinate's performance was high (*ab* = -.02, CI [-.102 , .011]). Therefore the results supported the hypothesis 3.

Discussion

A key contribution of this study is developing and testing a theoretical model explaining how and under what circumstances subordinates' cognitions about organizational world lead to the supervisory abuse. We integrated the disconnected theory on motivational goal-schema and victim precipitation to propose that subordinates' worldviews about organization instill certain attitudes in subordinates which becomes instrumental in inviting supervisory abuse. Specifically, we found that subordinates' dangerous worldviews about organization shape their attitudes of obedience and conformity. These attitudes can be exploited in the form of unpleasant supervisory behaviors towards subordinates. However, subordinates can temper against these unpleasant experiences by increasing their performance. Our results illustrate that the buffering effect of subordinate's performance does not hold for low and average rather it hold true for high performance. The first part of our hypothesized model (dangerous worldviews about

organization-authoritarian submission) was built on motivational goal-schema theory whereas the second part (authoritarian submission-abusive supervision) was based on victim precipitation theory. We found support for our hypothesized relationships. Our findings have several important bearings, which we explain below.

Note: References are provided from first author upon request