Subordinate social adaptability and the consequences of abusive supervision perceptions in two samples

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A B S T R A C T

The present investigation examined social adaptability as a moderator of the relationships between perceptions of abusive supervision and several work outcomes. Specifically, we hypothesized that individuals with lower levels of social adaptability would be more adversely affected by heightened levels of abusive supervision perceptions than employees with greater levels of social adaptability. Data from two samples offered strong support for the hypotheses. Specifically, employees with lower levels of social adaptability reported heightened job tension (i.e., Sample 1) and emotional exhaustion (Samples 1 & 2), as well as diminished job satisfaction (Samples 1 & 2) and work effort (Samples 1 & 2) as perceptions of abusive supervision increased, whereas employees with greater social adaptability skill were less strongly affected by their perceptions of abusive supervision. Contributions of the research to scholarship and practice, strengths and limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.

"We must make the best of those ills which cannot be avoided."  

[~Alexander Hamilton]

1. Introduction

Abusive supervision 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). It represents a context within which stressful stimuli impact subordinates to produce various strain reactions. Subordinates’ perceptions of abusive supervision have been associated with numerous stress-related outcomes, including job tension (Breaux, Perrewé, Hall, Frink, & Hochwarter, 2008), anxiety (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007), psychological well-being (Hobman, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2009), physical health (Bowling & Michel, 2011), insomnia (Rafferty, Restubog, & Jimmieson, 2010), problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006), burnout (Carlson, Ferguson, Hunter, & Whitten, 2012), and emotional exhaustion (Yagil, 2006).

Moreover, perceptions of abusive supervision also have been linked to important life and workplace outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Tepper, 2000), organizational commitment (Duffy & Ferrier, 2003), work withdrawal (Chi & Liang, 2013), life satisfaction (Tepper, 2000), work–family conflict (Hoober & Hu, 2013), and family satisfaction and functioning (Carlson, Ferguson, Perrewé, & Whitten, 2011). Finally, employee perceptions of abusive supervision also have harmful consequences for organizations, such as damaging effects on formal performance appraisals (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007), task performance (Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012), and organizational citizenship behavior (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Summarizing these results, Schyns and Schilling (2013) provided a meta-analytic review of outcomes associated with perceptions of abusive supervision and destructive leadership.
Research has shown that employee characteristics can mitigate the adverse effects of negative work stimuli (e.g., Perrewé et al., 2004; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001). Thus, individual differences may exist that serve to attenuate the relationship between subordinates’ perceptions of abusive supervision and negative work outcomes. For example, effective self-management has been noted as a useful means to cope with adverse consequences of narcissistic supervisors (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012). However, little abusive supervision research to date has focused on subordinates’ abilities to adapt to demands and coercions associated with interpersonal threats (i.e., abusive supervisors), and the stressful contexts such behaviors create for workers.

Social adaptability has been defined as an ability to acclimate or feel content in a wide range of interpersonal situations (Cooper & Hetherington, 2005), and it represents an individual difference factor that facilitates effectiveness in contexts characterized by rapid change and varying demands (e.g., Baron & Markman, 2003; LePine, Colquitt, & Erez, 2000; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000). For decades, scholars have recognized the importance of adaptability to address demands created by precipitously shifting work landscapes (Hormiga, Batista-Canino, & Sanchez-Medina, 2011; Strang, 1930). As an example, recent studies have associated adaptability with favorable reactions to advances in technology, globalization, economic crises, and a host of other environmental shifts (Koopmans et al., 2011; Pulakos, Dorsey, & White, 2006).

Building on these studies, scholars affirm that individuals must be adaptable in order to effectively manage the frequently chaotic structural elements of contemporary work environments (Baron & Tang, 2009). Incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach, we bring together conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) and self-regulation (Tepper et al., 2007; Thau & Mitchell, 2010) scholarship to explain the dynamics of social adaptability’s moderating role on the relationships between abusive supervision and several important cognitive (i.e., job tension, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion) and behavioral (i.e., work effort) consequences (Tepper, 2007). Advancing science and practice, this integrative resources–regulation perspective argues that differences in social adaptability represent an individual difference factor capable of explaining deleterious consequences of abusive supervision.

This research makes two primary contributions to the abusive supervision literature. First, we enhance our understanding of the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and workplace outcomes by examining the role of social adaptability. Second, we integrate theories on conservation of resources and self-regulation into an integrative resources–regulation theoretical perspective yet to be fully examined in prior abusive supervision research.

2. Background research, theory, and hypothesis development

2.1. The abusive supervision context

2.1.1. Moderators of abusive supervision–outcome relationships

Described as subordinates’ subjective perceptions of a sustained display of non-physical hostility, abusive supervision is characterized as a low base-rate phenomenon with important effects on both employee attitudes and behaviors (Tepper, 2007) and organization success (Martinho, Sikora, & Harvey, 2012). By definition, abusive supervision is a subjective assessment made by subordinates, which can be biased by employees’ past experiences and current personality characteristics, including both demographics and situational factors (Tepper, 2007).

Several studies have investigated the potential role of personality and other individual characteristics in abusive supervision contexts. For example, Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, and Kacmar (2007) examined ingratiation and positive affect as possible moderators of abusive supervision outcomes, and found a cumulative neutralizing effect on abuse. Most recently, Hu (2012) found that high levels of employees’ emotional intelligence attenuated the relationship between employees’ perceptions of supervisory abuse and emotional labor burden.

Consistent with these studies, employees’ perceptions of, and responses to, abusive supervision likely depend on subordinate characteristics in addition to the behaviors of supervisors. However, our understanding of such personal characteristic moderators of the abusive supervision–subordinate outcomes relationships is far from complete or conclusive (Tepper, 2007). We suggest that subordinate social adaptability represents a personal characteristic that buffers against the negative consequences of abusive supervision perceptions.

2.2. Social adaptability

2.2.1. Nature of the construct

Social adaptability refers to one’s ability to adjust cognitions and modify behaviors in response to changing situational demands and threats (Baron & Tang, 2009). In terms of its underlying characteristics, Ployhart and Bliese (2006, p. 13) suggested, “individual adaptability represents an individual’s ability, skill, disposition, willingness, and/or motivation, to change or fit different task, social, and environmental features.” In line with our conceptualization, Chan (2000) noted that some individuals are more adaptable than others, and that this personal attribute remains largely consistent over time. As a result of both consistency and flexibility, highly adaptive employees are able to better recognize changes in important situational cues, interpret events as challenging rather than stressful, and identify how situations should change relative to employees with low levels of adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

2.2.2. Theory and research

To date, much of the adaptability literature has associated the construct with performance-related outcomes (Chan, 2000; Ployhart & Bliese, 2006; Pulakos et al., 2000; Shoss, Witt, & Vera, 2012), as a predictor of transition management (Baron & Markman, 2003; Baron & Tang, 2009; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), or as a determinant of entrepreneurial success (Haynie, Shepherd, Mosakowski, & Earley, 2009; Hormiga et al., 2011). For example, LePine et al. (2000) used a knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) approach to
examine personality as a predictor of adaptive performance. Haynie and Shepherd (2009) suggested that cognitive adaptability (e.g., flexibility and self-regulation) helps entrepreneurs recognize opportunities and identify potential sources of venture creation. Finally, LePine et al. (2000) argued that adaptability’s influence on both individual and organizational outcomes is most pronounced when exercised in volatile work contexts.

Social adaptability is distinct from personality traits (e.g., the Big Five), even though it might share some overlap with specific elements. For example, conscientiousness (i.e., individual trait reflecting responsibility and dependability) and agreeableness (i.e., individual trait reflecting cooperativeness and compassion) have moderated the effects of abusive supervision in past research (e.g., Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006; Tepper et al., 2001). Several Big Five factors also have been directly associated with the work outcomes examined in this study (e.g., Furnham, Eracleous, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009). However, we argue that social adaptability will moderate the perceptions of abusive supervision–work outcome relationships beyond the effects of the Big Five personality traits.

Recently, scholars have attempted to integrate largely disconnected elements of the adaptability literature. Consistent with Ployhart and Bliese’s (2006) conceptualization, we integrate both resource and self-regulation perspectives to explain the consequences of abusive supervision as a function of variations in subordinates’ social adaptability. Specifically, we argue that subordinates low in social adaptability are likely to suffer the most negative consequences resulting from the stress and threat of abusive supervision contexts due to a lack of or depletion of resources and inability to self regulate. Alternatively, high social adaptability provides subordinates with the resource and regulation ammunition to neutralize the potential dysfunctional consequences of abusive supervision contexts.

2.3. Resources-regulation integrative theoretical perspective

2.3.1. Conservation of resources (COR) theory

Scholars have argued that resources can be characterized as either external (e.g., equipment, social support, status) or internal (e.g., personal resources, skills, action patterns) (Richter & Hacker, 1998; Yates & Kulick, 1977). Moreover, Hobfoll (1989) identified four types of resources that are accessible to individuals: objects (e.g., possessions, home), conditions (e.g., marriage, tenure), energies (e.g., time, money), and personal characteristics (e.g., skills, self-esteem). Studies have tended to conceptualize personal characteristics as a resource with self-regulating properties used to navigate stressful work environments (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001; Westman, Hobfoll, Chen, Davidson, & Laski, 2005).

Fundamentally, the tenets of COR theory maintain “that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 341), and that the threat of resource loss or actual depletion of resources triggers anxiety (Hobfoll, 1989). Furthermore, resource stores are perceptual, and fluctuate as a result of contextual demands and opportunities (Halbesleben & Wheeler, in press). Because of heightened unpredictability, employees are motivated to maximize resource infusion when environments are receptive to these behaviors. Conversely, when demands increase, employees are driven to concurrently invest resources to neutralize threats and conserve remaining stores for future use (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008; Hochwarter, Laird, & Brouer, 2008). As a mechanism for successful threat management, interpersonal forms of self-regulation play a pivotal role (Lopes, Salovey, Côté, & Beers, 2005) in determining experienced consequences of abusive supervision (Thau & Mitchell, 2010).

2.3.2. Self-regulation theory

Perceptions of abuse are psychologically challenging because they force employees to actively evaluate the sources and consequences associated with maladaptive treatment (Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). Adequate responses to supervisor threat require heightened self-regulation, discussed as the ability to infuse control by overriding one’s instinctive impulses and reactions (Baumeister & Alquist, 2009; Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). In terms of positive individual effects, self-regulation promotes effective goal pursuit (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), and encourages the demonstration of behaviors appropriate for the particular context.

In terms of person factors linked to self-regulation success, Karoly (1993, p. 35) noted, “some situations are ambiguous and/or multidimensional, potentially activating multiple and possibly incompatible standards while accentuating individual differences.” Moreover, Schmitt, Zacher, and Frese (2012) argued that individual differences in adaptation failure tax effortful self-regulation stores, leading to both fatigue and depletion of important resources, most notably in settings characteristically demanding and uncertain (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010).

Together, the COR and self-regulation theories are consistent with the differential exposure-reactivity model (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995), which suggests that traits can influence how employees perceive stimuli as stressors, as well as subsequent reactions. Specifically, COR theory provides the basis for examining resources (e.g., social adaptability) as a means to understand how employees interpret and respond to their work environments. We employ self-regulation theory to help further explain how subordinates differentially respond to perceptions of supervisory abuse (i.e., a stressor) based on their traits. We use COR and self-regulation theories in tandem to propose a blended integrative resource-regulation perspective. Specifically, we draw on the COR theory to highlight that stress can occur when mental and physical resources are depleted, and we draw on self-regulation theory to suggest that the depletion of resources can result in stress-driven behavioral reactions and outcomes.

In the present investigation, we recognize that subordinates’ levels of social adaptability can fundamentally influence how they perceive their interactions with supervisors. However, our objective is to understand how social adaptability, as a resource (i.e., personal characteristic), can influence subordinates’ reactions to perceptions of supervisory abuse. Bolger and Zuckerman...
(1995) proposed the differential choice-effectiveness model, which suggests individual differences can influence the choice of both coping strategy and effectiveness.

2.4. Hypothesis development: social adaptability as a buffer for abusive supervision effects

Subordinates’ perceptions of abusive supervision trigger adverse outcomes by taxing regulatory processes and draining necessary coping resources (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). In this regard, depletion increases passivity (Vohs et al., 2008), thus increasing susceptibility to impulsive or emotional responses to future episodes of abuse (Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004).

Prior research has indicated that resources may allow individuals to regulate behavior to meet work demands (Hochwarter et al., 2008). Consistent with recent research, social adaptability represents a self-regulatory asset capable of helping target employees resist stress and protect resources in abusive contexts (Lopes et al., 2011). In support, Van den Tooren and De Jonge (2010) maintained that individuals with greater adaptive (e.g., regulation) capacities are better able to use resources to regulate demands associated with external threat. Thus, highly adaptable individuals may be able to leverage resources to regulate demands associated with perceived supervisory abuse better than their less adaptable counterparts. This suggests less adaptable individuals are more likely (i.e., than more adaptable individuals) to experience stronger deleterious reactions to perceived supervisory abuse and the demands associated with it.

Because abuse causes resource depletion and self-regulation impairment (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012), targets are forced to respond. However, their tactics likely are defensive rather than assertive, and passive instead of active in these settings (Chang & Lyons, 2012). As a remedy, social adaptability represents an individual difference that is characteristically proactive (Ployhart & Bliwise, 2006) and contextually-engaging (Wrosch & Scheier, 2003). Based on this discussion, we contend that social adaptability, resource management, and self-regulation represent inextricably linked and integrative considerations when examined in the context of abusive supervision.

Subordinates’ perceptions of abusive supervision also have been associated with decreases in their levels of job satisfaction, which represents an overall sum of perceived work favorability (Locke, 1969; Weiss, 2002). The negative effects of abusive supervision perceptions on job satisfaction have been well documented (e.g., Bowling & Michel, 2011; Breaux et al., 2008; Haggard, Robert, & Rose, 2011; Kernan, Watson, Chen, & Kim, 2011; Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013; Tepper et al., 2009; Tepper, Duffy, Hoober, & Ensley, 2004), and often are described in terms of an inherent demand–control imbalance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This is consistent with our blended integrative resource-regulation perspective that suggests employees are likely to react negatively when their resources are depleted during self-regulation associated with reacting to perceptions of abusive supervision.

Highly adaptable employees are able to use fewer of their energies to regulate their cognitions than less adaptable employees. Therefore, they are less likely to experience significant changes in job satisfaction than low adaptability counterparts. Thus, we hypothesize that perceptions of abusive supervision will be negatively associated with subordinates’ job satisfaction, but that this relationship will be stronger for employees with lower levels of social adaptability, due to the additional resources lost during the self-regulation process.

**Hypothesis 1.** Employee social adaptability will moderate the abusive supervision–job satisfaction relationship such that the negative relationship between abusive supervision and job satisfaction will be stronger for employees with lower levels of social adaptability.

As noted, supervisory abuse is anxiety provoking (Breaux et al., 2008; Harvey et al., 2007). Despite the veracity of previously-confirmed relationships (Tepper, 2007), we suggest that social adaptability can serve as an attenuating influence. Highly adaptable employees likely utilize social adaptability as a resource that enables them to require less self-regulation to process, construe, comprehend, and respond to their perceptions of abusive supervision than less adaptable employees. The less demanding (i.e., resource-depleting) self-regulatory responses of highly adaptable employees result in fewer disturbances to employees’ natural homeostatic balances (Perrewé, Rosen, & Maslach, 2012). Disturbances can manifest in job tension, which occurs when employees experience a psychological reaction to intrusions in their perceived and/or objective work environments (Chisholm, Kasl, & Eskenazi, 1983).

We hypothesize that perceptions of abusive supervision will be positively associated with subordinates’ job satisfaction, but that this relationship will be stronger for employees with lower levels of social adaptability due to the additional resources (i.e., energies) lost during the self-regulation process.

**Hypothesis 2.** Employee social adaptability will moderate the abusive supervision–job tension relationship such that the positive relationship between abusive supervision and job tension will be stronger for employees with lower levels of social adaptability.

Prior research has found a negative relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and employees’ work effort (Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2011). Employees are thought to have a great degree of volitional control over their level of effort, which implies sensitivity to heightened environmental demands. Our integrative resource-regulation perspective suggests that employees with higher levels of social adaptability are less likely to experience meaningful losses of control, and subsequently reduce their levels of work effort than their low social adaptability counterparts. Following perceptions of abusive supervision, highly socially adaptable employees may engage in more continued work effort than their less socially adaptable counterparts in attempts to avoid the potential for future loss of resources attributable to perceptions of abusive supervision. We hypothesize that
perceptions of abusive supervision will be negatively associated with subordinates’ work effort, but that this relationship will be stronger for employees with lower levels of social adaptability, due to the additional resources lost during the self-regulation process.

**Hypothesis 3.** Employee social adaptability will moderate the abusive supervision–work effort relationship such that the negative relationship between abusive supervision and work effort will be stronger for employees with lower levels of social adaptability.

Finally, social adaptability is posited to influence abuse–burnout relationships. We suggest that perceptions of abusive supervision deplete employees’ emotional resources by requiring employees to regulate their reactions to the perceived abuse. As emotional resources are worn-out following perceptions of abusive supervision, employees may believe that they cannot continue to carry on at a similar psychological level, which may result in feelings of less energy and/or feelings that their emotional resources are depleted (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). This depletion of emotional resources impairs employees’ abilities to regulate their own behaviors.

Employees who have high levels of social adaptability may be able to avoid some of the deleterious effects of emotional exhaustion because they are less likely to engage in as much self-regulation over time as employees with low levels of social adaptability. Thus, we hypothesize that perceptions of abusive supervision will be positively associated with subordinates’ emotional exhaustion, but that this relationship will be stronger for employees with lower levels of social adaptability, due to the additional resources lost during the process of self-regulation.

**Hypothesis 4.** Employee social adaptability will moderate the abusive supervision–emotional exhaustion relationship such that the positive relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion will be stronger for employees with lower levels of social adaptability.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Plan of the research

The present research utilizes a two-sample design to test the capacity of social adaptability to serve as a stress-buffering resource for employees when perceiving abusive supervision in the workplace. Specifically, Sample 1 examines social adaptability as a boundary condition in the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and relevant self-reported psychological (i.e., job tension, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion) and behavioral (i.e., work effort) workplace outcomes with cross-sectional data. Sample 2 then seeks to replicate the results from the first sample, as the same relationships are examined across both samples, using time-lagged data.

Furthermore, we conducted tests of our hypotheses using a conservative approach. Specifically, we controlled for age, gender, and organizational tenure, which are demographic variables frequently used in the abusive supervision research. Also, we controlled for personality variables, in light of prior work that has documented relationships between agreeableness and abuse (Tepper et al., 2001), and that which has demonstrated linkages of both openness and extraversion with social adaptability (Digman, 1990; Pulakos et al., 2002). Thus, we use the Big Five personality traits as control variables in the present investigation to insure that moderator variance is due to the focal construct rather than potentially overlapping personality variables that went unmeasured. Finally, in addition to the main effect terms being entered as next steps in the regression analyses, nonlinear main effect terms were entered as well due to the focal construct versus the overlapping personality variables that went unmeasured.

With respect to the replicability of research findings, Popper (1959) suggested that it is difficult to accept research results as scientific observations until they have been replicated and subjected to external scrutiny. Constructive replications can use changes in measures, rating sources, sampling procedures, and/or subjects to provide further evidence for the validity of results that have been reported initially in single-study designs (Eden, 2002; Lykken, 1968; Schmidt, 2009). The consistent findings reported in multiple study research designs can increase confidence in the validity of obtained empirical results, and they can make meaningful contributions to theory in the field (Hochwarter, Ferris, & Hanes, 2011). Thus, we offer a two-sample replication investigation across two different sample procedures and two pools of subjects to provide greater confidence in the validity of our findings.

### 3.2. Participants and procedures

#### 3.2.1. Sample 1

Sample 1 consisted of respondents from two sources, both within the United States: employees of multiple engineering firms attending an industry conference, and employees of a manufacturing organization. Specifically, we distributed a survey to all 187 members of a professional engineering association participating in their association’s national conference. Drop boxes were used to collect surveys on site. A stamped envelope addressed to the researchers was provided as well. We received a total of 139 completed surveys (response rate = 74%); 135 surveys were completed and returned during the conference and four were sent through the mail. Also, a human resources representative of a manufacturing facility distributed surveys to all 209 production employees during weekly meetings at the facility. Surveys were returned to a centrally-located drop box. After two weeks, a total of 115 surveys were returned (response rate = 55%).
Data from the two organizations were combined for an overall sample size of 254 participants. The sample averaged approximately 40 years of age ($M = 40.03, SD = 11.01$), seven years of organizational tenure ($M = 7.37, SD = 11.01$), and was 59% male. For comparison purposes, the manufacturing employees were somewhat older (42.19 years versus 38.49) and reported longer mean organizational tenure (7.81 years versus 6.92 years) than manufacturing employees. As a percentage, gender was similar across organizations (male: engineering firms = 60%; manufacturing organization = 58%).

3.2.2. Sample 2
Consistent with prior demands–coping studies (Cullen, Fan, & Liu, in press; Harris, Harvey, & Booth, 2010; Hochwarter, Perrewé, Hall, & Ferris, 2005), as well as prior abusive supervision studies (e.g., Harvey et al., 2007; Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011; Mawritz, Mayer, Hooibber, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012), undergraduate students helped with data collection for our second sample. Students in a large undergraduate business class in the southeastern United States distributed surveys to individuals working full-time twice during an academic semester.

Respondents received surveys approximately 60 days apart (i.e., the date of survey completion was requested on the instrument). As recommended (Aronson, Wilson, & Brewer, 1998; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012), independent variables (i.e., demographics, personality, abusive supervision, and social adaptability) were collected at Time 1, and outcome measures (e.g., job tension, satisfaction, work effort, and emotional exhaustion) were collected at Time 2. Individuals provided their date of birth (month and day) on each survey for matching purposes. Course credit was given to students for participating in survey distribution.

A total of 341 surveys were given to students for each distribution (i.e., Time 1 and Time 2). At the conclusion of the data collection, we received 275 matched surveys (response rate = 81%). The respondents were asked to indicate their profession; a wide range of blue-collar (23%) and white-collar (77%) occupations were represented. The respondents averaged approximately 46 years of age ($M = 45.79, SD = 9.48$) and five years of organization tenure ($M = 5.05, SD = 7.17$). Lastly, women comprised approximately 53% of the sample.

3.3. Measures
We used a seven-point response format (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) for all measures, except the measure for perceptions of abusive supervision (which we measured with a four-point response format: 1 = *never* to 4 = *always*).

3.3.1. Abusive supervision
We used Tepper’s (2000) 15-item scale to measure perceptions of abusive supervision (Sample $1 - \alpha = .85$; Sample $2 - \alpha = .92$). “My supervisor ridicules me” and “My supervisor tells me my thoughts and feelings are stupid” are representative items.

3.3.2. Social adaptability
We used a five-item scale developed by Baron and Markman (2003) to measure social adaptability (Sample $1 - \alpha = .85$; Sample $2 - \alpha = .91$). “I have no problem introducing myself to strangers” and “I can easily adjust to being in just about any social situation” represent scale items.

3.3.3. Job tension
We used a six-item scale developed by House and Rizzo (1972) to measure job tension (Sample $1 - \alpha = .88$; Sample $2 - \alpha = .85$). “I work under a great deal of tension” and “My job tends to directly affect my health” represent scale items.

3.3.4. Job satisfaction
We used a five-item scale developed by Brayfield and Rothe (1951) to measure job satisfaction (Sample $1 - \alpha = .84$; Sample $2 - \alpha = .91$). “Most days I am enthusiastic about my work” and “Each day of work seems like it will never end” (reversed scored) represent scale items.

3.3.5. Work effort
We used a five-item scale developed by Brown and Leigh (1996) to measure work effort (Sample $1 - \alpha = .86$; Sample $2 - \alpha = .84$). “When there’s a job to be done, I devote all of my energy to it” and “When I work, I really exert myself to the fullest” represent scale items.

3.3.6. Emotional exhaustion
We used a nine-item scale developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) to measure emotional exhaustion on the job (Sample $1 - \alpha = .85$; Sample $2 - \alpha = .91$). “I feel emotionally drained from my work” and “I feel used up at the end of the work day” represent scale items.

3.3.7. Personality control variables
We used a 10-item scale developed by Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann (2003) to measure the Big Five personality factors. Each dimension contained two items, one of which was reverse-scored. For example, the neuroticism scale had anxious/easily upset and calm/emotionally stable as items. Inter-item correlations for extraversion (Sample $1 - r = .58, p < .01$; Sample $2 - r = .59, p < .01$), agreeableness (Sample $1 - r = .56, p < .01$; Sample $2 - r = .57, p < .01$), conscientiousness (Sample $1 - r = .57, p < .01$; Sample $2 -
Hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) were conducted to examine the moderating role of social adaptability on the abusive supervision–work outcomes relationships. Five steps were entered into the regression analyses. Data source (i.e., “Company”), age, gender, and organizational tenure were included in the first step, and the Big Five personality dimensions were examined in Step 2. Each of the demographic and Big Five variables included in the model were statistically significantly associated (i.e., correlated) with at least one of the focal variables of interest (i.e., abusive supervision, social adaptability, job tension, job satisfaction, work effort, emotional exhaustion), so they were all retained in the regression analyses.

Step 3 contained the abusive supervision and social adaptability main effect terms. Cortina (1993) noted that bivariate interactions in hierarchical multiple regression may be significant due to their likely overlap with unmeasured nonlinear main effect terms. Pierce and Aguinis (2013) clarified this point through their examination of the too-much-of-a-good-thing effect, which suggests that monotonic relationships eventually reach context-specific inflection points, then may turn asymptotic and result in a pattern of curvilinearity. Further, Edwards (2008) encouraged scholars to consider nonlinear terms, as a standard practice, when conducting moderated regression analyses to supplement discussions of linear conceptualizations.

There are also theoretical reasons for including nonlinear terms in the present study. Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986) suggested that deliberate and effortful information processing is likely to result in strong attitudes, which ultimately can drive perceptions and behaviors. In the context of the present study, it is possible that subordinates who perceive a great deal of supervisory abuse might develop patterns of self-regulated responses that, over time, develop attitudes that can drive more automatic interpretations of, and reactions to, perceptions of supervisory abuse. Alternatively, subordinates with great deals of social adaptability ultimately may experience loss of resources due to the depletion of resources required to engage in the cognitive processing necessary to regulate both attitudes and behaviors.

Note that we assumed there were linear relationships between abusive supervision, social adaptability, the abusive supervision × social adaptability interaction term, and the dependent variables of interest. Regardless, we included non-linear main effect terms in Step 4 in order to provide a more robust test of the abusive supervision–social adaptability interaction term in the regression models. The final step consisted of the abusive supervision × social adaptability interaction term.

Collinearity diagnostics were conducted to assess the influence of method variance on study results. Specifically, we calculated variance inflation factor (VIF) scores, which measure the extent to which collinearity among predictors affects the precision of a regression model. In general, VIF scores greater than 10 are considered problematic (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). As an additional check, we conducted tolerance tests, which provide a complimentary index of collinearity. Scores below .10 are deemed problematic (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). All VIF and tolerance scores were in acceptable ranges (i.e., highest VIF scores ranged from 1.6 to 2.0 and lowest tolerance scores ranged from .60 to .80).

4. Results

The substantive scales (i.e., abusive supervision, social adaptability, job tension, job satisfaction, work effort, emotional exhaustion) were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; Hu & Bentler, 1999) to assess whether our six-factor model fits the data acceptably. For both samples, results indicated that the model demonstrated acceptable fit to the data (Sample 1: comparative fit index (CFI) = .96, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .94, and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05; Sample 2: CFI = .97, TLI = .93, and RMSEA = .05). Additionally, items loaded significantly on their intended factors for the six-factor solution for both samples. Further, to examine possible effects of common method variance, we conducted a CFA for a single, or general, common method factor (i.e., we conducted Harman’s single-factor test; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). For both samples, Harman’s single-factor test (i.e., the single-factor solution) demonstrated poor fit to the data (Sample 1: CFI = .61, TLI = .48, and RMSEA = .19; Sample 2: CFI = .41, TLI = .30, and RMSEA = .20), suggesting that the use of a common method did not account for a majority of the variance in items. Thus, the results of our CFAs supported examination of the hypothesized model.

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for variables in Samples 1 and 2 are presented in Table 1. All bivariate relationships were consistent with results found in previous research with respect to both direction and magnitude. For example,
abusive supervision–work outcomes relationships comparable to those presented in Table 1 can be found in recent research (e.g., Bowling & Michel, 2011; Breaux et al., 2008; Harvey et al., 2007). Finally, the four dependent variables were only modestly correlated with each other (rs range from −.22 to .34). Statistically significant findings are reported below.

Regression results are shown in Table 2. Findings indicated that, in the final step, the abusive supervision × social adaptability cross-product term explained incremental variance in job satisfaction (Samples 1 and 2), job tension (Sample 1), work effort (Samples 1 and 2), and emotional exhaustion (Samples 1 and 2) above and beyond the variance explained by company, age, gender,
organizational tenure, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience, perceptions of abusive supervision, social adaptability, the abusive supervision nonlinear term, and the social adaptability nonlinear term. Thus, we found full support for Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4, and partial support for Hypothesis 2.

To offer a graphic depiction of the statistically significant moderator results, we plotted high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) and low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) levels of social adaptability across the range of abusive supervision scores (Stone & Hollenbeck, 1989; Stone-Romero & Liakhovitski, 2002). The interaction plots for the statistically significant interactions found in the two samples were similar, so only the plots for the first sample are presented.

As shown in Figs. 1–4, the simple slopes for the high social adaptability group were not statistically significant for job satisfaction (Sample 1: $b = .11$, ns; Sample 2: $b = .09$, ns), job tension (Sample 1: $b = −.04$, ns; Sample 2: $b = −.07$, ns), work effort (Sample 1: $b = .11$, ns; Sample 2: $b = .09$, ns), or emotional exhaustion (Sample 1: $b = −.03$, ns; Sample 2: $b = .05$, ns). However, the slopes for those low in social adaptability were statistically significant. Specifically, the slope for the low social adaptability group was negative for job satisfaction (Sample 1: $b = −.25$, $t = −2.04$, $p < .05$; Sample 2: $b = −.18$, $t = −1.98$, $p < .05$), positive for job tension (Sample 1: $b = .29$, $t = 1.99$, $p < .05$), negative for work effort (Sample 1: $b = −.30$, $t = −2.14$, $p < .05$; Sample 2: $b = −.33$, $t = −2.37$, $p < .05$), and positive for emotional exhaustion (Sample 1: $b = .20$, $t = 2.07$, $p < .05$; Sample 2: $b = .28$, $t = 2.77$, $p < .01$). Our results suggested that individuals low in social adaptability were more strongly affected by perceptions of supervisory abuse than individuals high in social adaptability.

5. Discussion

5.1. Contributions to theory and research

Extending and refining prior theory and research, we empirically investigated the stress-buffering capabilities of social adaptability on cognitive (i.e., job tension, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion) and behavioral (i.e., work effort) reactions to perceptions of abusive supervision in two samples, seeking to establish and then replicate results of hypothesis tests. Specifically, it was hypothesized that individuals reporting higher levels of social adaptability would be largely immune to the potentially debilitating effects of supervisor abuse. Across two samples, covering a wide range of occupations and work contexts, the hypotheses were strongly supported.

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Fig. 1. Interactive effects of abusive supervision and social adaptability on job satisfaction (Sample 1).

Fig. 2. Interactive effects of abusive supervision and social adaptability on job tension (Sample 1).
Collectively, these results contribute to multiple research areas. First, the results enhance our understanding of abuse–outcome relationships by examining the role of social adaptability. To date, considerable research has sought to identify person factors that either intensify or lessen harm associated with supervisor malevolence (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2012). However, research to date generally has failed to consider adaptability factors, instead focusing on personality (Harvey et al., 2007; Yang, Johnson, Zhang, Spector, & Xu, 2012) and perceptions of work characteristics (Harris et al., 2007). Coupled with recent studies examining similar constructs (e.g., emotional intelligence; Hu, 2012), our findings further document the importance of individual differences in dealing with external threats.

Second, our results support the integration of two theoretical perspectives (i.e., COR and self-regulation), which often have been used separately within the abusive supervision literature. Consistent with the COR theory, we found that a resource (i.e., social adaptability) provided stress resistance for those socially adaptive. As an explanation, COR theory identifies an assortment of resources that employees seek to accumulate, conserve, and protect. Self-regulation theories explain the actual process of resource loss and its depletion results in employees’ impaired abilities to regulate behavior.

Our blended integrative resource-regulation perspective is consistent with early work in the abusive supervision literature. Since Tepper’s (2007) call for an examination of supervisor-level, organizational-level, and cultural factors that may moderate subordinates’ perceptions of and responses to abusive supervision, many studies have examined these factors. Our investigation is consistent with Tepper et al.’s (2001) research that examined how subordinates’ individual differences moderate the relationship between subordinates’ perceptions of abusive supervision and their resultant dysfunctional and constructive outcomes.

5.2. Strengths and limitations

A focal strength of this research was our ability to replicate and extend prior findings in the abusive supervision literature across two unique samples (Eden, 2002; Lykken, 1968). Hochwarter et al. (2011) contended that multi-study designs function to increase confidence in the obtained findings by limiting speculation regarding artifactual (e.g., sample, settings, and measures) influences. In support, Campbell (1963) argued that replication and cross validation allow for more rigorous theoretical interpretations, and are thus required before results can be considered an established part of science. Finally, Schmidt (2009, p. 99) maintained that replication “is the important link that demonstrates that the underlying assumptions are working and that they can be transferred to a similar design testing for new ideas.”
Moreover, our results were supported using a conservative approach. Specifically, we controlled for demographic variables commonly used in the abusive supervision literature (i.e., age, gender, organizational tenure), Big Five personality variables, abusive supervision and social adaptability main effect terms, and nonlinear main effect terms — all steps considered useful in past research (Ng & Feldman, 2011).

A consistent criticism of single-survey research methodology (i.e., the method employed in sample 1) is that common method variance (CMV) biases the relationships between the measured variables (Chan, 2000). Although the common assumption is that the bias inflates the relationships, attenuation due to CMV is also possible (Chan, 2000; Podsakoff et al., 2012; Richardson, Simmering, & Sturman, 2009). Additionally, research has shown that the effects of CMV often are exaggerated (Chan, 2000).

Further, Siemsen, Roth, and Oliveira (2010, p. 469–470) noted that “researchers should not be criticized for CMV if the main purpose of their study is to establish interaction effects” as “CMV cannot create an artificial interaction effect. CMV can only deflate existing interactions.” The present investigation was conducted to evaluate the effects of the interaction of perceptions of abusive supervision and social adaptability. Thus, the presence of CMV would have made it more difficult to find a significant interaction, and should provide further evidence that the significant interaction effect found, in both studies, does exist (Siemsen et al., 2010).

There are also limitations that warrant discussion. First, our measures of the Big Five demonstrated low internal consistency estimates. This was not surprising, as each measure only included two items, one item for each of the positive and negative poles of the five personality factors (Gosling et al., 2003). Indeed, Gosling et al. found low internal consistency estimates when developing and validating the measure, and demonstrated that the measures still demonstrated acceptable levels of convergent validity, discriminant validity, patterns of external correlates (as compared to other measures of the Big Five), and test–retest reliability. Although low internal consistency estimates can attenuate results, Gosling et al.’s findings support the validity of the measure.

Another limitation stems from the nature of our data. Principally, one sample was cross-sectional and both relied on single-source, self-report data. To address limitations associated with this method of data collection, we designed the surveys in ways to minimize some of the common method concerns that accompany single-source, self-report data (e.g., use of various response formats, collecting data for Sample 2 over two points in time, protecting respondent anonymity; Podsakoff et al., 2003, 2012). Additionally, due to the perceptual nature of the constructs of interest (i.e., perceptions of abusive supervision, perceptions of one’s level of social adaptability, perceptions of job tension, perceptions of job satisfaction, perceptions of one’s level of work effort behaviors, and perceptions/feelings of emotional exhaustion), self-report data are acceptable. In support, scholars contend that self-reports of perceived mistreatment are surprisingly candid with little evidence of under-reporting (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Thau et al., 2009).

5.3. Directions for future research

Due to the relative lack of work examining social adaptability, more research is needed to better understand its resource-accruing role in both threat and opportunity situations. For example, research is needed to determine the origins and foundations of social adaptability, as well as to determine the boundary conditions that promote or derail its positive attributes. In this regard, incorporating a discussion that includes self-regulation failure (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), and self-gain/impairment (Thau & Mitchell, 2010) would be particularly useful. Finally, longitudinal research that gauges the malleability of social adaptation behavior would contribute to multiple scholarly domains, as would research that incorporates multiple raters of perceptions of abusive supervision and its effects.

Research should continue to examine the effects perceptions of abusive supervision have on subordinates’ tendencies to regulate their behaviors. Tepper et al. (2007) found that subordinates who more strongly perceived abuse tended to engage in regulative maintenance tactics more frequently than subordinates who perceived less abuse. Our empirical results build on Tepper et al.’s work, and demonstrate that employees with high levels of social adaptability are able to use self-regulation to avoid or lessen the effects of negative workplace outcomes.

Ultimately, it would be useful to develop a broad theoretical framework that could describe the underlying processes that influence perceptions of, and responses to, abusive supervision. For example, the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) might be a helpful framework from which to further develop our model. This type of framework could help researchers identify more constructs (i.e., moderators and mediators) that can attenuate some of the negative effects associated with perceptions of supervisory abuse.

Thus, future research should continue to examine how subordinates’ self-regulation abilities and tactics influence their reactions to perceptions of abuse. Another avenue for future research is examining whether employees who are socially adaptable perceive fewer or less intense workplace threats than those less socially adaptable. Although perceptions of abusive supervision are, by definition, perceptions of sustained behavior, it is possible that highly socially adaptable employees perceive less intense or less frequent abuse than employees with low levels of social adaptability. If confirmed, scholars should investigate social adaptability’s influence on employee enactment (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012), described as proactive behavior designed to create, modify, or eliminate features of one’s immediate work context (Weick, 1995).

Finally, our results contribute to theory and research by including nonlinear effects in our analyses. The “too-much-of-a-good-thing effect” suggests that relationships among constructs may not be linear once they reach a certain point (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). This is not surprising given the prevalence and importance of non-monotonic U-shaped and inverted-U-shaped effects in social science research (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). We found six significant nonlinear terms in our regression analyses, suggesting that perceptions of abusive supervision and perceptions of social adaptability may be related.
curvilinearly to the outcomes of interest. For example, we found a curvilinear effect for perceptions of abusive supervision on work effort (Sample 1: $\beta = -0.16, p < .01$; Sample 2: $\beta = -0.14, p < .01$), which suggested that individuals who perceived both low and high levels of supervisory abuse engaged in greater levels of work effort than individuals perceiving moderate amounts of supervisory abuse. Perhaps individuals perceiving low levels of supervisory abuse use their resources to put effort into their work and individuals perceiving high levels of supervisory abuse engage in greater amounts of work effort out of fear of more supervisory abuse.

Our results suggest that moderate amounts of perceptions of abusive supervision may be especially detrimental (i.e., inverted U-shaped form indicated by negative $\beta$) for employees, and the deleterious effects of perceptions of abusive supervision may have some unintended consequences. In some instances, moderate amounts of perceptions of abusive supervision may actually be associated with positive outcomes. For example, Lee, Yun, and Srivastava (2013) found curvilinear effects for the effects of perceptions of abusive supervision on subordinates’ creativity such that highest levels of supervisor-reported creativity were reported at moderate levels of perceptions of abusive supervision. This highlights the complex nature of perceptions of abusive supervision and perceptions of social adaptability in organizations, and brings attention to the importance of examining the nonlinear effects of abusive supervision and personality characteristics in the prediction of important workplace outcomes. Future research should continue to examine the nonlinear effects of abusive supervision and personality characteristics on important subordinate-level, supervisor-level, group-level, and organization-level outcomes.

5.4. Practical implications

There are several practical implications of our investigation. First, organizations may benefit from hiring socially adaptable employees, and incorporate this attribute into both selection and training programs. Based on our results, in the short term, highly socially adaptable employees are able to leverage their interpersonal acuities to avoid unfavorable psychological (e.g., job tension, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion) and behavioral (e.g., work effort) consequences — even in aversive settings. The results of a highly socially adaptable workforce may include benefits to the organization that accompany having less stressed, more satisfied, and more productive employees. These benefits could include favorable employee outcomes (e.g., increased well-being, heightened engagement) as well as positive contributions to the workplace (e.g., greater efficiency, increased profitability, more organizational citizenship behaviors). Interpersonal adaptability will likely assume an important role in workplaces characterized by abusive (Tepper, 2000, 2007) and destructive (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007) supervisory and leader behavior.

Of course, employing socially adaptable employees also may contribute to dysfunction within organizations if objective supervisory abuse is present and goes unnoticed. Additionally, employees that continuously have to leverage their ability to adapt to social situations may use a lot of their resources dealing with their supervisors, rather than leveraging their resources to perform their job duties. Also, employees dealing with perceived or objective supervisory abuse may blame their organizations for perceived supervisory abuse (Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagencyk, 2013), and may attempt to replenish lost resources by taking them from the organization, rather than from the supervisor responsible for the initial loss of resources. Ideally, organizations would attempt to eliminate abusive behavior, but this may not always be possible. In the long term, it is important for organizations to consider that socially adaptable employees may find indirect means of responding to perceptions of abusive supervision that may go unnoticed by organizations.

6. Conclusion

The deleterious consequences of employees’ perceptions of abusive supervision have been well-documented. The potential role for social adaptability to serve as a resource that employees can bring with them into, and develop within, organizations provides value to the abusive supervision literature. Although organizations cannot always influence subordinates’ perceptions of their supervisors’ behavior in the intended manner, employing adaptable individuals that can manage perceptions of abusive supervision and uncertain workplace environments is a real possibility. Employees must try to make the best of unavoidable problems, so it is important to find employees who can change/adapt. We hope our findings will stimulate more research examining the potential role of social adaptability as a stress-buffering resource for employees.

References


Lee, Y., & Srivastava, S. (2013). Curvilinear effects for the effects of perceptions of abusive supervision on subordinates’ creativity such that highest levels of supervisor-reported creativity were reported at moderate levels of perceptions of abusive supervision. This highlights the complex nature of perceptions of abusive supervision and perceptions of social adaptability in organizations, and brings attention to the importance of examining the nonlinear effects of abusive supervision and personality characteristics in the prediction of important workplace outcomes. Future research should continue to examine the nonlinear effects of abusive supervision and personality characteristics on important subordinate-level, supervisor-level, group-level, and organization-level outcomes.