ABUSIVE SUPERVISION THROUGH THE LENS OF
EMPLOYEE STATE PARANOIA

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ABSTRACT

We use insights into the social dynamics of state paranoia to better understand and explain the evolution and effects of perceived abusive supervision. Within our framework, abusive supervision and employee state paranoia are reciprocally related. We explain how perceived abusive supervision can influence paranoid arousal (characterized by extreme distrust, a sense of threat, anxiety and fear of one’s supervisor) and paranoid cognition (characterized by hypervigilance, rumination, and sinister attribution tendencies), and has attendant implications for employee behavior. We also identify an intra-personal mechanism of cognitive bias (e.g., sinister attribution tendencies, interpretive bias), and an inter-personal process of victim precipitation, whereby employee state paranoia can influence both experienced and subjective evaluations of abusive supervision. In addition, we identify personal, relational and contextual factors that moderate the relationship of abusive supervision and employee state paranoia. Our analysis brings into focus the psychological and emergent nature of abusive supervision, as well as the mechanisms by which abusive supervision influences employee psychological well-being and behavior.

Keywords: Paranoia, abusive supervision, distrust, victim precipitation.
“Managers who abuse their power over subordinates... trigger intense emotional reactions, as anyone who has experienced it can attest,... thus setting the stage for deteriorating boss-subordinate relationships and paranoia.” (Frost, 2003: p. 41)

“A man’s worst enemy can’t wish him what he thinks up for himself.” (Yiddish proverb)

Within modern work organizations, supervisors are the organizational authorities with the most control over employee work experiences and outcomes. Because of this, employee perceptions of supervisory abuse, characterized by sustained displays of hostile verbal and non-verbal behavior, are highly salient for them and have far-reaching consequences (Burton & Hoobler, 2006; Tepper, 2000). Employees sense abuse when they believe that their supervisors have ridiculed them in the presence of others, spread rumors about them, taken undue credit for work that they have done, withheld information from them, given them the ‘silent treatment’, and invaded their privacy (Keashly, 1998; Tepper, 2007). Empirical findings associate employee-appraised supervisory abuse with increased psychological distress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Tepper, 2000), as well as reduced organizational commitment, job satisfaction, trust, and state self-esteem (Burton & Hoobler, 2006; Duffy & Ferrier, 2003; Tepper, 2000). Employee perceptions of abusive supervision have also been linked to reduced employee work performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007) and organizational citizenship behavior (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), as well as increased counterproductive work behavior (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000, 2007; Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Geider, Hu, & Hua, 2009), resistance behavior (Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001), and turnover (Tepper, 2000, 2007).

Notwithstanding the progress that researchers have made in identifying attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of abusive supervision, we have much to learn about the social-psychological processes that explain employee responses to abusive supervi-
sion and the persistence of abusive supervisor-subordinate relationships over time. Although abusive supervision is explicitly defined in perceptual terms (Tepper, 2000), empirical findings in this domain have often been discussed and interpreted as evidence concerning abusive treatment of a more objective and independently verifiable sort (e.g., Sutton, 2007; Tepper, Duffy, & Breaux-Soignet, 2012). However, employee responses to abusive supervision are shaped by the mind-states of followers as well as the behavior of supervisors. Indeed, deliberative and attribution processes internal to employees have important roles to play in determining not only whether and to what extent ambiguous supervisory action (e.g., use of language that belittles employees in the presence of others) and inaction (e.g., giving employees the silent treatment) are interpreted and understood as being abusive, but also the nature of employee affective, cognitive and behavioral responses to perceived abuse.

We draw conceptual foundations for our analysis of employee responses to abusive supervision from an established and growing social psychological literature on state paranoia (Freeman, Pugh, Green, Valmaggia, Dunn & Garety, 2007; Kramer, 1998, 2001; Zimbardo, Andersen & Kabat, 1981). Following Kramer (2001), we define paranoia within organizations as “a form of heightened and exaggerated distrust that encompasses an array of beliefs, including organizational members’ perceptions of being threatened, harmed, persecuted, mistreated, disparaged, and so on, by malevolent others within the organization” (2001: 6). Such distrust may have its roots in either real or imagined harm, and can reflect either a chronic paranoid disposition or an induced paranoid state (Edens, Marcus, & Morey, 2009; Freeman et al., 2008). We draw primarily from paranoia scholarship conducted in non-clinical settings or with a mix of clinic-based and non-clinical participants. Although we readily acknowledge the potential effects of trait or dispositional paranoia on workplace...
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behavior, our focus is on explaining the dynamics of abusive supervision within a framework for understanding situation-specific or state paranoia.

Our decision to focus on employee state paranoia as a response to abusive supervision is informed by evidence that experienced and perceived abusive supervisory treatment (e.g., bullying, aggression, victimization, petty tyranny) can engender in employees psychological states that are central to post-traumatic stress, including distrust, anxiety, and fear (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino & Edmondson, 2009). Indeed, distrust, anxiety and fear are central elements of ‘paranoid arousal’ (PA), with implications for the thoughts and actions that follow. We focus on hypervigilance, rumination, and sinister attribution tendencies as thought patterns that are prototypical of ‘paranoid cognition’ (PC).

We have also chosen to focus attention on the relationship of abusive supervision with employee state paranoia because it helps us to address the problem of persistence and escalation of abuse in supervisor-subordinate relationships over time. Although researchers have been aware of this problem for over a decade (Tepper et al., 2001), a compelling answer has not been found (Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne & Marinova, 2012) and the existing models that guide inquiry do not address it (Tepper, 2007). We maintain that, as a dynamic of employee state paranoia, employee perceptions of supervisory abuse provide impetus for ‘safety behaviors’ (Freeman, Garety & Kuipers, 2001) and ‘suspicion behaviors’ (Ickes, Dugosh, Simpson & Wilson, 2003; Marr, Thau, Aquino & Barclay, 2012)—behavioral routines associated with elevated social anxiety and paranoia—which we explain as consequences of paranoid arousal and paranoid cognition. However, as we explain, these supervisor-directed actions enacted in response to perceived abuse and ostensibly to reduce personal risk and threat, most often serve to intensify rather than reduce supervisory
abuse. Beyond the narrow domain of abusive supervision, we see broader applicability of this conceptual framework to employee experiences of victimization at work more generally (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

We believe that our research re-positions and advances scholarship concerning abusive supervision in three fundamental respects. First, as noted above, our dynamic framework incorporates feedback loops—interpersonal mechanisms that capture behavioral patterns of initiation and response, together with intra-personal mechanisms that are more reflective of cognitive bias—to explain the persistence and escalation of abusive supervision over time. Second, we broaden the focus of research attention beyond what supervisors do (e.g., abusive supervisory behavior) to address what employees perceive (e.g., employee perceptions of supervisory abuse). In so doing, we are able to bring into focus the mechanisms by which paranoid arousal—characterized by feelings of distrust, anxiety and fear—and paranoid cognition—characterized by hypervigilance, rumination, and sinister attribution tendencies—function as determinants of employee safety and suspicion behaviors, and shape subsequent employee appraisals of supervisory abuse. Third, we address personal, contextual and relational contingencies that moderate the effects of perceived supervisory abuse on the social dynamics of state paranoia that we study.

We begin with a brief overview of social psychological theory concerning non-clinical paranoia, followed by focused consideration of the implications that follow for employee experiences of supervisory abuse. Finally, we also address important implications for research and managerial practice that follow from our analyses.

SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON NON-CLINICAL PARANOIA

In social psychological terms, a person experiencing paranoia “believes that harm is occurring, or is going to occur, to him or her, and that the persecutor has the
intention to cause harm” (Freeman, 2007: 427). In the organizational literature, paranoia is described as “heightened and exaggerated distrust that encompasses an array of beliefs, including organizational members’ perceptions of being threatened, harmed, persecuted, mistreated, disparaged, and so on, by malevolent others within the organization” (Kramer, 2001: 6). As a condition of heightened distrust, paranoia is characterized by an activated psychological state of anxiety and fear of threat (i.e., paranoid arousal) that can only be described as aversive (Freeman, 2007). These are consuming emotions that grip attention and demand resources. These emotions are also associated with patterns of social cognition and action tendencies adapted for self-preservation (Freeman, Garety, Kuipers, Fowler, & Bebbington, 2002; Freeman, 2007; Frijda, 1986).

Paranoia, as an aroused psychological state, guides the attention and attribution processes associated with social understanding. That is, attention becomes selectively focused on threat-related information (e.g., hypervigilance), disproportionate cognitive resources are dedicated to processing and re-processing what stimuli is perceived (e.g., rumination), and the attribution processes associated with information processing are skewed towards threat detection. Sinister attribution tendencies include over-estimation of the extent to which one is the target of others’ attention, ready acceptance of information that appears to confirm suspicions as authoritative, and systematic discounting or denial of evidence to the contrary (Bell, Halligan, & Ellis, 2006; Bentall, Corcoran, Howard, Blackwood, & Kinderman, 2001; Kramer, 1994). Through these cognitive processes, beliefs concerning the malevolence of others receive cognitive elaboration, evidence of offense is extracted from available information, and the sentiments of fear, anxiety, and distrust that are foundational to paranoia as a psychological state become established. Thus, as paranoid ideation takes
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hold, these cognitive processes serve as an internal feedback loop that serves to intensify and strengthen paranoia (Freeman et al., 2001).

Action tendencies associated with paranoid psychological states are commonly referred to as safety behaviors—behaviors enacted with the aim of reducing the risk and magnitude of threat from perpetrators (Freeman & Garety, 2004). Avoidance of the source of threat is the most prevalent form of safety behavior. Freeman and colleagues found that over 90% of participants in their study reported using this safety behavior in their efforts to deal with perceived threat. Other principal safety behaviors include compliance, ingratiation, help-seeking, and aggression (Freeman et al., 2001, 2005). Their empirical findings further show that people often use more than one safety behavior. Thus, for instance, compliance and ingratiation may be the safety behaviors adopted in unique situations where avoidance is not possible.

Given the interpretive biases inherent in paranoid social cognition, safety behaviors are non-falsifiable. When negative outcomes occur despite the fact that safety behaviors have been performed, paranoid individuals are inclined to acknowledge that things could have been worse and that the threat was legitimate. Also, questions concerning the appropriateness of safety behaviors are rarely asked and the absence of negative outcomes is explained as a positive consequence of ‘near misses’ made possible by safety behavior enactment (Salkovskis, 1991).

Beyond safety seeking behaviors, researchers have identified suspicion behaviors as monitoring and testing actions that naturally follow from hypervigilant and paranoid thought (Ickes et al., 2003; Marr et al., 2012). As we discuss, safety and suspicion behaviors have central roles to play in the intra- and interpersonal processes that perpetuate and intensify state paranoia.
In phenomenological terms, paranoid psychological states, patterns of thought, and behaviors are observed not only in clinical populations but also in the general “healthy” public (Freeman et al., 2005; Freeman, McManus, Brugha, Meltzer, Jenkins, & Bebbington, 2011). As Fenigstein & Vanable observe, “ordinary individuals, in their everyday behavior, manifest characteristics—such as self-centered thought, suspiciousness, assumptions of ill will or hostility, and even notions of conspiratorial intent—that are reminiscent of paranoia” (1992: 130). Thus, beyond biological or dispositional bases for the distrust, anxiety and fear that are foundational to paranoia, the experiences of everyday life—including experiences of abuses of power, bullying, aggression and victimization—are sources of psychological trauma that can bring about paranoid-like psychological states and thinking. Not surprisingly, findings from a nationally representative study of paranoia in the UK (n=7281) show that work-related stresses and interpersonal problems as primary correlates of paranoia in the general population (Freeman et al., 2011). In light of their findings, Freeman and colleagues observe, “Once persecutory ideation is conceived as a spectrum, its importance at both an individual and a societal level becomes increasingly apparent” (Freeman et al., 2011: 934).

In the sections that follow, we present our integrative framework for studying the social dynamics of abusive supervision through the lens of state paranoia (see Figure 1). We focus on employee paranoia as it is reflected in an activated psychological state, a distinctive pattern of social cognition, and both safety and suspicion behaviors (e.g., Freeman, et al., 2007; Kramer, 2001; Lincoln, Peter, Schäfer, & Moritz, 2009; Marr et al., 2012). Our approach is aligned with the convergence of thinking in social psychology (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992; Zimbardo et al., 1981), clinical psychiatry (Freeman, 2007) and organization science (Kramer, 2001). We acknowledge that peo-
ple experience degrees of paranoia across situations and over time (e.g., trait paranoia; Edens et al., 2009), and that this increases the likelihood of paranoid arousal, thinking and behavior in specific settings. However, we focus on state paranoia to better understand, explain and predict the social dynamics of abusive supervision.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND PARANOIA WITHIN SUPERVISOR-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIPS

Paranoid Arousal: Supervisor-directed Paranoia as a Psychological State

Consistent with the way abusive supervision’s effects have been studied, employee paranoid states are triggered by perceived negative treatment and harmful events (Freeman, Garety, Kuipers, Fowler & Bebbington, 2002). Furthermore, as with scholarship on abusive supervision, our concern is with psychological rather than physical harm. Supervisory abuse can be particularly harmful because supervisors typically hold clear positions of power within superior-subordinate relations. Beyond concerns with immediate abusive treatment, the effects of a supervisor’s disfavor are likely to be felt across time and work situations (e.g., pay increments, promotions, opportunities for favorable job assignments, and performance evaluations). Furthermore, supervisors represent for employees both leading voices within peer group relations and the weight of the organization’s authority. Thus, relative to abusive treatment from customers, coworkers or subordinates, perceived supervisory abuse has particular salience for employees (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

The psychological trauma of perceived supervisor abuse is a precipitating condition for supervisor-directed sense of threat, anxiety, fear and distrust (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Schat & Kelloway, 2000). These are the constituent components of
paranoia as a psychological state. This understanding is highly consistent with evi-
dence that victims of non-physical harassment at work experience suspiciousness,
nervousness, hypersensitivity, and feelings of threat (Brodsky, 1976), and that har-
assed workers claiming compensation report higher levels of suspiciousness and para-
noid ideation than do non-harassed claimants (Gandolfo, 1995).

Consistent with the way in which paranoia is defined, we view paranoid arousal
not simply as a condition of low trust—where what is hoped for from others cannot be
counted on to occur—but rather one of situated distrust—where what one fears from
others is considered certain, anticipated and planned for (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies,
1998). Here we bring into focus the emotional or affective quality of distrust, as
reflected in emotions of anxiety and fear (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). We contend that
as supervisory abuse (whether real or imagined) and the attendant threat-focused
emotions of anxiety and fear which follow are experienced repeatedly over time,
paranoid arousal can become, for the employee, a defining property of his or her
supervisor-subordinate relationship. That is, with multiple experiences of trauma to-
gether with anxiety and fear, threat-oriented and distrusting emotions can be elicited
automatically as conditioned or ‘associated’ responses to a supervisor’s mere presence
(Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). Over time, paranoid arousal takes on a life of its own,
providing impetus for paranoid thought and action, and transforming the way
employees deal with supervisory behavior (Kramer, 2001).

Paranoid Cognition: Patterns of Supervisor-Directed Paranoid Thought

Abusive supervision experienced in the present and anticipated in the future—
being made a scapegoat and blamed for the mistakes of others, having rumors told
about oneself, being given the silent treatment, and not being given access to critical
information and resources that one needs—represents a significant identity threat and
provides impetus for sense-making (Weiner, 1985a). Repeated abuse can also activate
distrust-oriented social cognitive processes for dealing with negative consequences
that, apart from prudent anticipation and evasive action, can be expected in the future
(Kramer, 2001; Weiner, 1985b). Here we consider hypervigilance, rumination and
sinister attribution tendencies as prototypical of paranoid social cognition.

Wary employees can be expected to disproportionally allocate cognitive re-
sources for monitoring and processing threat-related information (Bell et al., 2006;
Kramer, 2001). Employees in paranoid psychological states become hypervigilant,
monitoring for information concerning present and future behaviors of an abusive
supervisor so that potential threats to the self can be detected early and prudent action
can be taken (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). They can also be
expected to worry and ruminate on threat-related issues, especially in light of the fact
that the true purposes behind leader behaviors may be ambiguous, and sinister inten-
tions are not always immediately apparent. Thus, they depend upon their own pru-
dence (e.g., hypervigilance) and insight (e.g., rumination) to detect and defuse the

For employees in paranoid psychological states, failures of detection are more
problematic than false alarms. Thus, beyond allocating greater cognitive resources to
collecting and processing threat-related information, wary employees are inclined to
attribute sinister intentions to the behavior of others. Within complex organizational
settings where resources are scarce and fought for by competing interest, the personal
implications of ambiguous information and veiled threats take on new meaning. These
individuals are fully prepared to find evidence of the threat they fear and motivated to
detect it when present. By the same token, letting down one’s guard is not done
lightly, and evidence that might suggest to others that sinister attributions are in-
appropriate can be summarily ignored, denied or re-interpreted in a negative light. These attribution tendencies—over-personalizing ambiguous social events, accepting evidence that confirms worst-case fears and discounting disconfirming information—combine as components of a robust sinister attribution bias (Freeman et al., 2002).

Finally, holding constant other factors, paranoid cognition—characterized by hypervigilance, rumination and a bias towards sinister attribution—is likely associated with elevated appraisals of abusive supervision. That is, when cognitive resources are uniquely focused on collecting threat-related information and processing it through a sinister lens, greater evidence of supervisory misbehavior is likely to be found than would otherwise be the case. In effect, the ruminative information processor does more with data on hand, distilling greater evidence of supervisory abuse from his or her memories of past encounters. Thus, in the absence of additional new stimuli or social feedback, the cycle of paranoid cognition becomes self-sustaining (Kramer, 2001; Zimbardo et al., 1981).

Bringing together our analysis of supervisor-directed paranoia as a psychological state and as a prototype of social cognition, we see the potential for upward spirals of paranoid psychological arousal, paranoid thinking and appraisals of hostility (Freeman et al., 2001). Scholars have argued that individuals experiencing abuse from a perpetrator in the past are more inclined to judge the perpetrator’s future behavior as abusive (Keashly & Harvey, 2005; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008). Our framework explains how this happens. That is, experiences of abusive treatment activate a paranoid psychological state wherein social information concerning that individual is monitored and processed through a lens of exaggerated distrust. Escalation occurs as greater ‘evidence’ of abuse is distilled from the evidence than would otherwise be the
case, which in turn causes the cycle of paranoid activation and information processing to be repeated at an intensified level.

The basic propositions that follow from our framework are as follows:

**Proposition 1:** Perceived abusive supervision is positively associated with paranoid arousal, which is characterized by extreme distrust, sense of threat, fear and anxiety toward one’s supervisor.

**Proposition 2:** Paranoid arousal is positively associated with paranoid cognition, characterized by hypervigilance, rumination, and sinister attribution tendencies.

**Proposition 3:** Paranoid cognition is positively associated with perceived abusive supervision.

**Moderators of Perceived Abusive Supervision’s Effects on Paranoid Arousal**

Our framework brings together perceived abusive supervision and employee state paranoia within a robust recursive model. We also recognize important personal, situational and relational factors that moderate the direct effect of perceived supervisory abuse on paranoid arousal. Past research has established the role of individual differences in directing employee attention to and shaping employee interpretations of social cues. We identify dispositional paranoia, negative affectivity, and neuroticism as individual factors that uniquely sensitize employees to evidence of abusive supervisory treatment and moderate abusive supervision’s effects on paranoid arousal. Building upon pioneering research on the social information environments within which paranoid arousal and thinking occurs (Zimbardo et al., 1981; Kramer, 1994, 1998), we argue that contextual and relational factors making social information processing more or less difficult for employees also influence the relationship between perceived supervisory abuse and paranoid arousal. Here we focus attention on employee status
as a member of a minority or stigmatized group, aggregate levels of stress at work, and perceived organizational support as key contextual factors. Finally, we address the buffering effects of support from personal or work relationships, together with the confounding effects of inconsistent supervisor behavior. In addressing these factors, we explain the dynamics of supervisory abuse with greater fidelity, and we bring into sharper relief the unique explanatory role of state paranoia within our model.

**Individual factors.** For personality psychologists, individual differences capture between-person variation in the cognitive schemas and interpretive filters that people use to detect, organize, interpret and respond to stimuli in their social environments (Mischel, 2004; Schneider, 1983). Dispositional paranoia—which we define as a stable tendency to approach people and situations with suspiciousness, exaggerated distrust and hostility towards others (Kramer, 2001; Edens et al., 2009; Falkum, Pedersen, & Karterud, 2009)—is clearly an individual factor that increases the likelihood of paranoid arousal and thought in response to unfavorable workplace experiences. Employees high in dispositional paranoia can be expected to regard abusive supervisory treatment as a relevant situational cue meriting attention and a response. For these employees, the priming effects of supervisory abuse (whether real or imagined) are acute, providing impetus for paranoid arousal and information processing. This is highly consistent with evidence, from a study of social exclusion and paranoia in a large non-clinical sample, that the positive relationship of social exclusion with state paranoia becomes stronger as dispositional paranoia increases (Westermann, Kesting & Lincoln, 2012). This argument is further corroborated by evidence not only that dispositional and state paranoia are distinct constructs, but also that dispositional paranoia strengthens the tendency of people to distrust and attribute malevolent motives to others’ behavior (Edens et al., 2009; Falkum et al., 2009). Thus, we
propose that employee dispositional paranoia moderates the relationship between perceived abusive supervision and employee paranoid arousal such that this relationship becomes stronger as dispositional paranoia increases.

Given the negative arousal reflected in an orientation towards anxious thought, fear, and sense of threat, we also believe that neuroticism and negative affectivity are constructs that are aligned with paranoia. Neuroticism is defined in terms of a dispositional tendency to experience anxiety, depression, hostility, as well as a tendency towards impulsivity and vulnerability to stress (Costa & McCrae, 1988; McCrae & Costa, 1985). Similarly, negative affectivity captures a chronic tendency to experience negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, fear, guilt, anger, subjective distress) across time and situations (Watson & Clark, 1984). We argue that individuals high rather than low in neuroticism and negative affectivity are uniquely sensitive to contextual cues of mistreatment, inclined to perceive abusive supervisory treatment in ambiguous situations, and thus more likely to report higher levels of abusive supervision. This is precisely the finding of one recent meta-analysis of research concerning abusive supervision and damaging leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Building on this idea that abusive supervision has considerable trait-relevance for employees high in neuroticism and negative affectivity, we would argue that the relationship between perceived supervisory abuse and paranoid arousal becomes stronger as employees’ neuroticism and negative affectivity increases.

**Proposition 4:** The positive association of perceived abusive supervision and paranoid arousal becomes stronger as dispositional paranoia, negative affectivity and neuroticism increase.

**Contextual factors.** The broader significance of episodic or situated paranoia becomes more apparent as we consider the role of the social information environment
within which paranoid arousal and cognition can occur. Indeed, pioneering experimental work by Zimbardo and colleagues (1981) on the relationship of partial deafness with paranoia demonstrated that paranoid thinking was most likely to be observed among subjects that were unaware (rather than aware) of their impaired hearing condition. Prior work by clinicians revealed that elderly patients experiencing gradual hearing loss over time (and were thus unaware that they could not hear properly) were more inclined towards paranoid ideation than elderly patients with either no hearing impairment or full knowledge of when and how hearing was lost. Patients unaware that they could not hear well would suspect that others were whispering about them and talking behind their backs. Fervent denials of whispering in response to their questioning, especially when this ‘whispering’ persisted, could be interpreted by the patient as lies and further substantiation of others’ sinister intentions. Of course, increasingly aggressive questioning about whispering by the hearing impaired individual, and expressions of frustrations at its persistence, could provide an objective reason for others to avoid the party in question and start discussing his or her bizarre behavior. Alas, patients detecting this induced whispering could interpret it as substantiation for their paranoid-like thoughts. Similarly, social withdrawal as a self-conscious response to being talked about would only exacerbate the problem, as apparent whispering would appear to increase. Ultimately, for Zimbardo and colleagues, paranoia emerged as the product of ineffective navigation of the information environment and the failure of feedback mechanisms to correct false thinking.

In exploring the organizational analog to the ‘hard of hearing’ condition, Kramer (1998, 2000, 2001) has focused attention on the conditions of social information environments in organizations that intensify the effects of member adverse experiences with others on paranoid arousal. For Kramer, feelings of self-conscious-
ness and being under evaluative scrutiny are substantially higher among demographic minorities (e.g., African Americans within groups composed primarily of Caucasians; women within predominantly male groups) and members of stigmatized groups (e.g., as a function of religious affiliation, sexual orientation, physical/mental disability, or criminal record). In his comparative study of the experiences of token MBA students (e.g., African American men, African American women, and openly gay students) relative to non-token MBA students (Caucasian, male and ostensibly heterosexual students), Kramer found that token students reported greater self-consciousness and discomfort in social interactions at school than their non-token counterparts. Relative to their non-tokens, token MBA students recalled a greater number of adverse experiences in their school-related interactions, and these recalled incidents were categorized by an independent sample of raters as reflecting greater attributed intentionality and greater paranoia in general (Kramer & Wei, 1999; Kramer, 1998, 2001).

We recognize that Kramer’s analysis conflates two aspects of social distinction—minority status (Kanter, 1977) and social stigma (Crocker, Major & Steele, 1998)—that have been the focus of separate scholarly traditions and are by no means identical. Kramer shows sensitivity to this distinction, acknowledging that those with minority status may view their social group as enjoying “social credits,” as was the case for one Female Asian MBA student “Because she was Asian and petite, she thought that people assumed she was not only exceptionally bright, but also modest, sincere and hardworking” (Kramer & Wei, 1999: 158-159). We contend that minority status and social stigma are most problematic when they jointly define social situations. Under these conditions, where sensitivity to devaluation and mistreatment from others is at its highest, evidence of supervisory abuse is most likely to be responded to with a heightened sense of threat, anxiety and fear.
Finally, we recognize that members of minority and stigmatized groups are at times targets of discrimination, and that self-reports of abusive treatment may be highly factual. For these individuals, especially in light of their reduced access to protective social resources and social power, paranoid arousal reflects a reasoned response to perceived supervisory abuse. At the same time, however, we recognize the potential for conflation, with systematic cognitive bias also being present under conditions of social distinctiveness (Kramer & Wei, 1999). On both counts, we posit that minority status and stigmatized-group membership serve to strengthen the degree of association between perceived abusive supervision and paranoid arousal.

Proposition 5: The positive association of perceived abusive supervision with paranoid arousal is stronger for employees who are demographic minorities within the organization and members of stigmatized social groups.

The capacity of individuals to contend with the hard-of-hearing problem referenced earlier is reduced when psychological resources for self-regulation are depleted. The central premise of ego-control theories is that the resources available to an individual for self-regulation (e.g., coping with stress, dealing with sources of vulnerability and uncertainty, and regulating negative affect) are finite, and effective self-regulation is compromised when resources are depleted (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Self-regulation and control is concerned with over-riding automatic urges and desires that might otherwise shape thought and action. We contend that the linkages from perceived supervisory abuse to paranoid arousal and the action tendencies that follow are highly schema-driven and automatic (Fenigstein, 1997). As such, we maintain that the strength of association between perceived supervisory abuse and paranoid arousal becomes stronger as employee resources for self-regulation become depleted.
Work stressors in many forms—task overload, role ambiguity, organizational politics, work-family conflict, injustice and mistreatment from one’s organization or coworkers, organizational failures and economic downturns, experienced or anticipated organizational change, and such—represent competing claims on resources for self-regulation. These stressors make the social environment more difficult to navigate, increase the anxiety associated with social uncertainty, and they cannot be ignored. Abusive supervision is itself a contributing factor to workplace stress that is resource intensive. We contend that the relative presence or absence of work stressors makes a difference because of their implications for resource availability—an employee’s capacity for effective self-control in responding to supervisory abuse becomes compromised as workplace stressors increase and resources are depleted. As aggregate stress levels increase, the linkage between distrusting responses to supervisory abuse, anchored in fear of threat and anxiety, becomes stronger.

Proposition 6: The positive association of perceived abusive supervision with paranoid arousal becomes stronger as work stressors increase.

Whereas organizational stressors represent competing demands for finite self-regulatory resources, systems of support within organizational settings can be expected to serve a protective or buffering function (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Perceived organizational support refers to employees’ global perception that their organizations value their contributions and care about them (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). When perceived organizational support is high rather than low, employees believe that their organizations can be counted on to help them handle stressful situations that might arise and function effectively at work (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Robust empirical findings from past research have shown that perceived organizational support moderates the effects of various
workplace stressors on psychological and physiological strain (George, Reed, Ballard, Colin & Fielding, 1993; Leather, Lawrence, Beale & Cox, 1998; Schat & Kelloway, 2003). We believe that buffering effects such as these are no less likely to be observed when stress in the form of supervisory abuse occurs. Consistent with past evidence of the buffering effects of perceived organizational support, we posit that the relationship of employee perceptions of supervisory abuse with paranoid arousal becomes weaker as perceived organizational support increases.

*Proposition 7:* The positive association of perceived abusive supervision with paranoid arousal becomes weaker as perceived organizational support increases.

**Relational factors.** Beyond organizational support, employees receive social support from diverse other sources—teams and coworkers (Bishop, Scott, Goldsby, & Cropanzano, 2005; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008), family members (Lim & Lee, 2011), formal and informal mentors (de Tormes Eby, et al., 2012; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), customers (de Clercq & Rangarajan, 2008) and such—that serve a similar protective and buffering function (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Social support from relationship sources have a vital role to play in sustaining feelings of social power, and of being able to cope with work challenges at all times and especially when supervisory abuse is perceived. Consistent with this understanding, Duffy, Ganster and Pagon (2002) found that social support from coworkers interacts with social undermining from supervisors such that the negative effect of supervisory undermining on somatic complaints (e.g., self-reported physical health problems at work) becomes less strong as coworker support increases. Similarly, Hobman, Restubog, Bordia, and Tang (2009) found that social support from team members serves to mitigate the negative effect of supervisory abuse on employee anxiety. More
generally, we contend that relationship-based social support from sources other than
the focal supervisor serves a buffering function that reduces the extent to which dis-
trust, fear and anxiety follow from perceived supervisor abuse.

Proposition 8: The positive association of perceived abusive supervision with
paranoid arousal becomes weaker as social support (e.g., from
coworkers, formal and informal mentors, family members)
increases.

Although our central premise is that the social support an employee receives
from his or her organization and relational ties functions as a buffer that weakens the
effects of supervisory abuse on paranoid arousal, our discussion has been focused on
supervisory abuse as a uniform pattern of treatment that expressly excludes supervisor
support. However, supervisors are not always consistent in how they treat their em-
ployees, both across situations and over time. Supervisors sometimes say one thing
and do another, they sometimes fail to follow through on their promises, and they
sometimes provide support and undermine selectively (e.g., communicating support in
private, but in public taking personal credit for employee accomplishments). We have
no doubt that the role conflict supervisors face within vertical chains of command is a
contributing factor, creating conditions not only for inconsistent behavior but also for
employee perceptions of inconsistency. By the same token, we acknowledge that
researchers would be hard pressed to substantiate the existence of a midpoint reflect-
ing supervisory indifference or inaction on a singular continuum ranging from super-
visory abuse to supervisory support. Rather, empirical findings from both organiza-
tional science (Duffy et al., 2002; Hobman, et al., 2009; Lian, Ferris & Brown, 2012)
and the broader social sciences (Birmingham, Uchino, Smith, Light & Sanbonmatsu.
2009; Holt-Lunstad, Uchino, Smith & Hicks, 2007) show that interpersonal relational
ties are characterized by varying degrees of both supportive and abusive treatment are well. Furthermore, these findings reveal that co-present support and abuse within a given relationship is a source of ambivalence that is associated with physiological harm and negative arousal that exceed levels attributable to abusive treatment alone (Birmingham et al., 2003; Duffy et al., 2002; Hobman, et al., 2009; Lian et al., 2012).

The clear message from findings such as these is that, in light of the ambivalence it creates, inconsistent supervisory treatment reflecting higher levels of supervisory support together with degrees of supervisory abuse, amplifies the detrimental effects of supervisory abuse on paranoid arousal.

Proposition 9: As supervisory support increases, the positive association of perceived abusive supervision with paranoid arousal increases.

State Paranoia’s Consequences: Safety and Suspicion Behaviors

The psychological effects of paranoid activation become visible as we observe their implications for behavior. Findings of primary research conducted in both clinical and non-clinical settings (e.g., Freeman et al., 2005) show that individuals experiencing paranoia engage in safety behaviors—behaviors enacted with the aim of reducing the risk and magnitude of threat from perpetrators. Safety behaviors are commonplace among individuals who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), including the stress associated with workplace victimization and bullying (Koch & Haring, 2008). Thus, for example, a person involved in a stressful event like a fatal car accident might frequently engage in ‘back seat driving’ and depress an imaginary brake pedal. However, these behaviors may not actually reduce the objective risk in the situation, and their performance may be a source of frustration to others, including fellow passengers and especially the vehicle’s driver. Reviewing studies of safety behaviors associated with paranoid ideation, Freeman and colleagues identify avoid-
ance, compliance, ingratiation, aggression, and help seeking as principal forms (Freeman et al., 2001, 2007). Here we address safety behaviors as relevant behavioral consequences of paranoid arousal sourced in abusive supervision.

Avoidance. Across the spectrum of paranoid ideation, including both clinical and non-clinical spheres, avoidance is by far the most prototypical behavioral response (Freeman et al., 2005; Freeman & Garety, 2004; Kramer, 2001). Individuals feeling anxious about the threat represented by the presence of a distrusted party reduce the likelihood of being harmed by that party through some form of avoidance. Avoidance can be physical—leaving the room when the source of threat enters, finding alternative routes so that one does not have to walk past that party’s office, and not attending events where that party may be present. It can entail reduced dependence on the source of threat—not depending on or approaching that party for resources or information, creating relationships and routines to buffer oneself from that party. Avoidance can entail disengagement and psychological withdrawal, where one chooses not to behave in ways that win attention (e.g., reduced OCB) and discloses as little of oneself as possible. Our analysis of avoidance as a safety behavior is highly consistent with what we have learned about avoidant behavior as a response to abusive supervision (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007) and the implications of abusive supervision for reduced OCB (Tepper, 2007).

Ingratiation and compliance. Individuals experiencing paranoia may ingratiate or comply with perpetrators in the hope of gaining their acceptance and favor, and thus reducing the extent and likelihood of incurring harm (Freeman et al., 2001). For example, individuals experiencing paranoid arousal may comply with and conform to others’ expectations, and do favors for others (Freeman et al., 2001). Consistent with
this understanding, Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter and Kacmar (2007) identify ingratiation behavior as a response to abusive supervision.

**Aggression.** People in paranoid psychological states may resort to aggression as a behavioral response to perceived threat. Verbal aggression can take the form of telling others to ‘get off my back’, and aggressive action can signal to perpetrators that they are “not to be messed with.” This is consistent with empirical findings that abusive supervision is positively associated with supervisor-directed aggression and the resistance behavior of employees (Inness, Barling, & Turner, 2005; Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011; Tepper et al., 2001).

**Help-seeking.** Individuals experiencing paranoid arousal may seek help from others (e.g., asking family and friends for advice on how to deal with their perpetrators, filing legal complaints, complaining to people who are higher in the social hierarchy, forming coalitions, and even asking God for help) in order to deal with perpetrators and thus reduce and/or prevent future threat. Within the broader literature on behavioral responses to abuse more generally, researchers observe that victims can seek help both through formal (e.g., filing complaints) and informal means (e.g., seeking advice from others) (Keashly, 1998).

Our framework of safety behaviors captures most of the behavioral responses to perceived supervisory abuse and other negative forms of employee-directed supervisory behavior (e.g., victimization, bullying, ostracism, undermining, and incivility) (e.g., Tepper, 2007). Our premise is that impetus for action comes from the distrust-based emotions of paranoid arousal, including a sense of threat, anxiety and fear that supervisory abuse engenders.

*Proposition 10:* Employee paranoid arousal is positively associated with safety behaviors.
**Suspicion behaviors.** In addition to safety behaviors that follow from paranoid arousal, we acknowledge that suspicion behaviors also accompany paranoid cognition (Ickes et al., 2003; Marr et al., 2012). As a behavioral counterpart to hyper-vigilance, suspicion behavior can take various forms—for example, monitoring closely the supervisor’s behavior for signals of malevolence, secretly following the supervisor, eavesdropping on the supervisor’s private phone conversations, and setting up test situations to see if the supervisor might lie about facts or events (Ickes et al., 2003). Empirical findings from a recent field study of 506 employees from a cross-section of companies in the United States showed that higher work-related paranoid cognition in general was associated with a greater incidence of coworker-directed suspicion behavior (Marr et al., 2012). We contend that supervisor-directed paranoid cognition is a proximal predictor of supervisor-directed suspicion behaviors.

*Proposition 11:* Employee paranoid cognition is positively associated with suspicion behaviors.

**Increased Paranoid Social Cognition as an Intra-Personal Consequence of Safety and Suspicion Behaviors**

The safety behaviors that follow from paranoid arousal are performed in response to, and in the hope of dealing with, stressors at their source (Salkovskis, 1991; Freeman et al., 2001). The immediate effects of safety and suspicion behaviors, however, are intrapersonal in nature, as safety and suspicion behaviors serve to maintain paranoid patterns of thought. We explain this as a consequence of both the interpretive bias through which outcomes of safety and suspicion behaviors are appraised (Freeman et al., 2002; Salkovskis, 1991) and the commitment escalation that occurs when employees perform these behaviors (Salancik, 1977; Staw, 1976).

The behavioral routines of employees and their supervisors have an episodic quality, and cause-effect relations are often ambiguous. Because the timing for and
nature of abusive behavior remains at the perpetrator’s discretion, safety behaviors must be oversupplied. From an employee’s perspective, although safety behaviors may not ward off all abusive treatment, their perceived value as a mechanism for mitigation is un-questioned. When safety behaviors are not performed and a supervisor behaves in an abusive manner, an employee has only him- or herself to blame. When harm is experienced even though safety behaviors were performed, it is a potent reminder of why the perpetrator is feared, and there is comfort in knowing that things could have been worse in the absence of safety behaviors. When safety behaviors are performed and abusive treatment does not immediately follow, there is no doubting that safety behaviors were necessary—the operative understanding is that the safety behaviors served the purpose for which they were performed (Freeman et al., 2002).

The interpretive lens through which those in activated states of paranoia evaluate the consequences of their safety behaviors makes it difficult for them to correctly appraise either the legitimacy of perceived threats or the efficacy of their behavioral responses. Thus, for example, an employee’s paranoid arousal that follows from perceived supervisory abuse may result in the employee taking steps to minimize interactions with his supervisor (e.g., avoidance), and saying positive things to the supervisor when interaction becomes necessary (e.g., ingratiation). These safety behaviors are performed in acknowledgement and anticipation of supervisory abuse that would otherwise be forthcoming. Periods of non-abuse are credited to the efficacy of the safety behaviors performed, and there is a sense that “near misses” have been averted (e.g., the safety behaviors effectively deflected harm that would have otherwise occurred). This conclusion is considered more credible than the alternative view that no threat was present. Importantly, because safety behaviors that provide a measure of psychological relief substantiate their efficacy, they reinforce within the
performer a commitment to vigilance. Not surprisingly, we find that paranoid social cognition can be not only sustained but also enhanced by safety behavior.

Although suspicion behaviors are distinct from safety behaviors, they function in a way that is very similar. Suspicion behaviors are a natural counterpart to hyper-vigilance, and the expectation of deception from others is reason enough to understand why suspicions are not always confirmed. Occasional evidence that can be interpreted as confirmation of a suspicious mind’s fears may be all that is needed to sustain beliefs about the importance of continued vigilance.

Our arguments linking safety and suspicion behaviors with sustained and even increased paranoid social cognition are highly consistent with scholarship addressing the effects of sunk costs and behavioral commitments to courses of action (Kiesler, 1971; Salancik, 1977; Staw, 1976). Within the organizational literature, behaviors serve to commit those performing them to courses of action, especially when the behaviors are to some extent identifiable, explicit, volitional and public (Kiesler, 1971; Salancik, 1977), and when performers invest personal resources and effort (Staw, 1976). From this perspective, safety and suspicion behaviors are identifiable actions, often public, and chosen and performed for a strategic purpose. As personal investments are made through safety and suspicion behavior performance, and alternative courses of action are set aside, commitment increases and the importance of believing that one’s chosen course of action has value and meaning increases. Furthermore, with increased commitment comes a reinforced belief in the hostile motives of the abusive supervisor, the value of safety and suspicion behaviors, and by implication the importance of continued vigilance in monitoring (hypervigilance), information processing (rumination) and sense-making (sinister attributions).
*Proposition 12a:* Increased employee safety behaviors are associated with sustained or increased paranoid social cognition.

*Proposition 12b:* Increased employee suspicion behaviors are associated with sustained or increased paranoid social cognition.

**Abusive Supervisory Treatment as an Interpersonal Consequence of Safety and Suspicion Behaviors**

As with safety behaviors performed in response to, and in the hope of dealing with, stressors at their source (Salkovskis, 1991; Freeman et al., 2001), employee behavioral responses to perceived supervisory abuse are ostensibly performed to reduce the occurrence of abusive treatment in the future (Tepper et al., 2001). The emerging research on victim precipitation of supervisory abuse however reveals that provocative and submissive employee behaviors, including those performed in response to prior abuse, provide supervisors with impetus to treat employees in ways that are even more abusive. Drawing insight from the broader literature on workplace victimization in its various forms (e.g., hostility, aggression, harassment, bullying and ostracism) (e.g., see Aquino & Thau, 2009, for a recent review), we argue more generally that employee safety and suspicion behaviors directed towards supervisors, irrespective of the form of their enactment, are associated with increased supervisory abuse (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Aquino & Thau, 2009; Olweus, 1978).

Across the various patterns of employee responses to victimization, empirical findings do show that retaliation from perpetrators is commonplace and that cycles of abuse often escalate (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Cortina & Magley, 2003; Zapf & Gross, 2001). For example, Cortina and Magley (2003) found that the coping responses of mistreated victims (e.g., confronting the source, seeking social support), rather than reducing mistreatment, were associated with escalation through retaliation in various
forms. Zapf and Gross (2001) found that, irrespective of whether victims of workplace mistreatment used ‘constructive’ or ‘destructive’ responses, mistreatment escalated until victims left their organizations or were transferred to departments beyond perpetrator reach. In light of the limited potential for employee behavioral responses to deal with the mistreatment they experience, Aquino and Thau (2009) conclude that exit—leaving their organizations or established work situations—is for many employees the most viable option for them.

One explanation for systemic escalation of abuse turns on the fact that people can become victims of abuse for various reasons. Indeed, researchers have identified two very distinctive patterns of behavior—submissive and provocative—that are prototypical of victims of abuse within organizations (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Olweus, 1978). Submissive individuals behave in ways that show themselves anxious, insecure, and socially withdrawn. Employees who respond to perceived supervisory abuse through withdrawal or avoidance, together with ingratiatory and compliant conduct focused on placation or appeasement, fit well within this category. Appearing unable and/or unwilling to defend themselves against attack, they appear to potential perpetrators as attractive targets for abuse. By way of contrast, individuals who respond to perceived mistreatment with aggression and efforts to enlist assistance from others present themselves as provocative targets for abuse. Specifically, aggressive behaviors present the performer as a target deserving of retaliation (e.g., Zapf & Gross, 2001). Help-seeking behaviors—especially when focused on coalition formation with peers or senior managers—may similarly invite retaliation (e.g., Cortina & Magley, 2003; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Although employee suspicion behaviors (e.g., eavesdropping on the supervisor, closely monitoring or following the supervisor, deliberately testing out the supervisor) are not overt acts of aggression, their intrusive
and distrusting nature is no less provocative and can be expected to elicit similarly aggressive responses. In sum, whereas submissive conduct positions the employee as an easy and attractive target for abuse, provocative conduct renders the employee a deserving target of abuse (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004).

We acknowledge that researchers do identify some responses to supervisory abuse as more effective than others because they are differentially predictive of internal psychological states (e.g., anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion). For example, Tepper et al. (2007) found stronger effects of abusive supervision on psychological distress (e.g., anxiety) when employees used avoidant patterns of communication, and weaker effects when employees communicated directly with their supervisors (e.g., discussing the relationship problem with their supervisor). In a related study, Harvey et al. (2007) found that ingratiation mitigated the negative effects of abusive supervision on subordinates’ psychological distress (e.g., emotional exhaustion, anxiety). However, these studies do not address whether different responses are associated with more or less abusive supervisory treatment and whether cycles of abuse persist.

Evidence from the broader literature on workplace victimization suggests that employee efforts at help-seeking, appeasement and aggression are equally likely to sustain mistreatment from perpetrators (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Cortina & Magley, 2003; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008; Zapf & Gross, 2001). In line with these findings, we posit that, apart from exit, employee safety and suspicion behaviors are positively associated with abusive supervisory behavior.

**Proposition 13a:** Increased employee safety behaviors are associated with increased abusive supervisory behavior.

**Proposition 13b:** Increased employee suspicion behaviors are associated with increased abusive supervisory behavior.
The cycle of interpersonal initiation and response repeats itself when employees perceive and respond to the treatment that they receive from their supervisors. In our analysis, we are explicit in distinguishing the objective behavioral routines of supervisors (e.g., abusive supervisory behavior, as well as other behavioral routines that are central to supervisory work) from what employees perceive (e.g., perceived abusive supervision). The precondition for ‘cycles of interaction’ to escalate into ‘spirals of abuse’ is that employees perceive that supervisory abuse has increased, and this becomes increasingly possible when two mutually reinforcing conditions are met.

Firstly, levels of perceived supervisory abuse can be expected to increase with objective supervisory abuse. Our expectation is that objective changes in abusive supervisory treatment are not likely to go unnoticed by employees, and that elevation in perceived supervisory abuse contributes to the escalation in the abuse cycle. Secondly, elevated appraisals of supervisory abuse become more likely as patterns of employee social cognition become prototypically paranoid (e.g., characterized by hyper-vigilance, rumination, and sinister attribution tendencies). In this regard, empirical findings from a recent experimental study of the role of hostile attribution styles in appraisals of abusive supervision are particularly instructive (Brees, 2012). In this study, Brees asked 756 working adults to appraise the extent to which a supervisor they observed interacting with and communicating substandard evaluations to a subordinate during the course of a six-minute video-recorded performance review meeting would be likely to behave in an abusive manner. Brees found that the hostile attribution style of working adults, characterized in terms of the tendency to attribute negative personal outcomes to the stable internal qualities of perpetrators, was a positive predictor of their appraisals of abusive supervision. Holding supervisory behavior constant, he effectively isolated and demonstrated the critical role of social infor-
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mation processing patterns in the process by which abusive supervision is evaluated. Admittedly, the appraisals examined in this research reflected expectations for supervisory abuse rather than perceptions of abusive treatment personally received. Nevertheless, evidence such as this suggests that differences in patterns of social perception can be expected to influence employee appraisals of, attributions for, and responses to the objective aspects of their treatment from others.

We also note that, under conditions of high paranoid cognition, everyday supervisory behaviors (e.g., performance monitoring, efforts at initiating structure) can be misconstrued as abusive. Thus, more generally, we contend that paranoid cognition serves a moderating role by conditioning employee attributions for what they see supervisors do. That is, employees are likely to perceive and attribute greater abuse to both benign and potentially threatening behavior when paranoid cognition is high than when it is low. We summarize this basic proposition as follows,

**Proposition 14:** Paranoid cognition moderates the relationship of supervisor behavior with perceived abusive supervision such that greater abuse is perceived under conditions of high (rather than low) employee paranoid cognition.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND RESEARCH**

Our conceptual framework has substantive implications for abusive supervision scholarship. First, we call attention to the affective and cognitive mechanisms that can explain employee responses to perceived supervisory abuse. Given the strong action tendencies of paranoid arousal’s constituent emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, distrust), we view the underlying process that drives safety behavior as substantially automatic or schema-driven. By way of contrast, paranoid cognition captures deliberative sensemaking mechanisms (e.g., hypervigilance, rumination, and sinister attrib-
ution tendencies) that direct not only suspicion behaviors but also more fundamentally the way in which knowledge of supervisory abuse is updated and changed over time. Our framework is highly consistent with established dual process models of social cognition, and it brings into focus the role of each in the employee responses to supervisory abuse (Kahneman, 2011; Smith & DeCoster, 2000).

Secondly, we bring into sharper focus the distinction between what subordinates perceive or believe about supervisory treatment (employee-appraised abusive supervision) and what their supervisors actually do (abusive supervisor behavior), and we model the dynamic relationship between them. Indeed, we find that scholars frequently interpret research findings in this domain as evidence concerning abusive supervisory behavior, even when employee-appraised abusive supervision is the sole focus of their empirical work (Sutton, 2007; Tepper et al., 2012). Although perceived supervisory abuse is unquestionably informed by the objective qualities of supervisory treatment, factors internal to employees—the extent to which they collect data on abuse (e.g., are hypervigilant), re-process data (e.g., ruminate) and use frames of analysis that are fine-tuned to detect threat and abuse (e.g., sinister attribution tendencies)—also play a substantive role (Brees, 2012). We also highlight the potential for employee perceptions of supervisory abuse to influence subsequent supervisory treatment through their effects on employee paranoid arousal, paranoid cognition, and the safety and suspicion behaviors that follow from employee state paranoia.

Clearly, we stand to benefit from better understanding not only ‘why supervisors abuse employees’ but also ‘why employees perceive supervisor treatment as abusive’ (Martinko, Harvey, Sikora & Douglas, 2009, 2011). Our conceptual work contributes to the field by challenging researchers to be more precise in their claims about the domain to which their research contributes, and by identifying key antecedents
and consequences of employee subjective appraisals of supervisory abuse for empirical attention.

Thirdly, departing from established models of abusive supervision, we specify concrete feedback mechanisms to explain its persistence and escalation over time. The existence of spirals of supervisory abuse and employee aggression was acknowledged first by Tepper and colleagues (2001), and later reiterated by another group of scholars (Mawritz et al., 2012). However, a decade has gone by since Tepper and colleagues first raised this issue, and reciprocal effects remain absent from the established frameworks that guide inquiry. Our paranoia-based framework is intended to fill this void in the literature, and suggest directions for future research.

Admittedly, we are not to first researchers to model dynamics of escalation in patterns of perception and behavior within relational contexts. We must acknowledge the pioneering contribution of Douglas McGregor (1960), who explained how manager assumptions about employees disliking work (e.g., Theory X) can set in motion a powerful cycle of controlling managerial behavior and employee resistance that is self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating. McGregor maintained that employees dislike work and shun responsibility because of the way that managers treated them, and not because this is their innate nature. We are also mindful of Andersson and Pearson’s (1999) theoretical work on incivility spirals that proceed from one party’s perception of mistreatment from another and the second party’s retaliatory response.

As with our paranoia-based framework, these models show that enacted abuse or incivility is not a necessary condition. Rather, they locate the starting point for negative spirals of mistreatment with one party’s (mis)perception or (mis)understanding of the other’s behavior and motives. These models also show that, as a function of the untoward treatment they experience, responding parties can behave in
ways that make them unwitting co-conspirators in the process of relational demise. This outcome is highly consistent with findings in the emerging literature on victim precipitation of abuse (e.g., Aquino & Thau, 2009; Hershcovis & Rafferty, 2012).

Whereas McGregor focused attention on supervisor Theory X assumptions, their implications for supervisor behavior, and their effects on employees as responding parties, we model the effects of employee perceptions on their safety and suspicion behaviors, and the implications that follow for supervisor responses. Our line of reasoning rests on the premise that employee safety and suspicion behaviors can be expected to be viewed by supervisors as unacceptable and to invoke varying degrees of sanctioning from them. For instance, employee avoidance behavior can provide a supervisor with impetus to monitor and control behavior, help seeking (especially when the supervisor is identified as the source of the problem) can be viewed by a supervisor as undermining his or her authority, and aggression can be viewed as an act of provocation. We maintain that supervisor responses to behaviors such as these can be expected to entail varying degrees of coercion and force, be viewed by supervisors as appropriate to the situation, and be perceived by employees as reflecting increased abuse, especially for those employees experiencing elevated state paranoia.

The bold argument that follows from our theoretical work is that there may be very little difference between the social dynamics that emerge when employees must contend with supervisor behavior that is abusive from the outset and those observed when abusive treatment emerges more gradually as a product of supervisor-subordinate interaction. In both cases we find that employee state paranoia and supervisory abuse are interlocked within a self-perpetuating cycle. After some time it matters precious little, especially from the standpoint of predicting what might happen next,
whether the point of origin for these dynamics is traced back to supervisor misbehavior or to subordinate misperception.

In acknowledging the potential endogeneity of supervisory abuse, we must affirm that we have no desire either to absolve leaders of their responsibility for past and present acts of abuse or to suggest that employees are somehow responsible for the supervisory abuse they experience at work. We simply acknowledge that behavior is conditioned by the environments of interaction in which people work, that this is true for supervisors as well as employees (McGregor, 1960; Zimbardo, 2007), and that the consequences of interpersonal misunderstanding and inappropriate responding can be seriously compounded over time. As we discuss in more detail below, we believe that these realities present substantial challenges for managers—especially those managers who have not intentionally performed abusive acts—in recognizing signs of employee misunderstanding and responding in more enlightened and constructive ways to employee safety and suspicion behaviors.

**Boundary Conditions and Directions for Future Research**

Notwithstanding the ways in which our framework refocuses scholarship and thus contributes to the literature on abusive supervision, we recognize boundary conditions of our paranoia-based model that merit attention in future research. Here we address four issues with particular salience.

First, it will be important to give more systematic attention to supervisor-related factors in future research. Our focus is on the perceptions, affective arousal and thought patterns of employees, and their implications for employee safety behaviors, suspicion behaviors, and what follows from them. However, supervisors also make appraisals of others’ behavior, experience affective arousal, and these have implications for patterns of thought and action. That is, just like employees, supervi-
Sors can experience paranoid arousal and paranoid cognition, and they can engage in safety-seeking and suspicion behaviors (Kramer, 2000).

Secondly, because employee state paranoia and the safety and suspicion behaviors that follow from it can have their source in employee misperception of supervisory behavior, we believe that supervisors can take practical steps to contain the dynamics of abuse and forestall escalation. For instance, enlightened supervisors can help by facilitating corrective social feedback, establishing dialogue with employees so that misunderstandings can be detected and corrected at an early stage (Cameron, 1943). Furthermore, supervisors can connect employees with human resource personnel who can work with them to establish the non-necessity of safety and suspicion behaviors. As noted above, the central problem of safety behaviors is that they are non-falsifiable—people performing them believe that disaster would have occurred in their absence, but have no experience-base on which to support this conclusion. By securing developmental guidance and coaching for employees, supervisors may be able to help them see that their safety behaviors may be unnecessary and their paranoid thoughts and feelings may be unfounded.

However, we recognize that the competitive business requirements giving short-term results and performance indicators primacy also make it difficult for supervisors to justify more enlightened responding to employee safety and suspicion behavior. In light of strong situational factors like these, we believe that supervisors are most likely to respond in enlightened ways when they subscribe to values of compassion and care for others (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 1990; Simola, Barling & Turner, 2010; White, 1992). Such responding is also most likely from supervisors who adopt the servant leadership style (Greenleaf, 1977; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson,
Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010) and who are high in leader consideration (Judge, Piccolo & Illies, 2004).

Thirdly, we recognize the need to address behavioral consequences other than safety and suspicion behaviors. For instance, the social dynamics of displaced aggression have been studied within the context of abusive supervision in some detail. However, the focus of that scholarship has been on how employee-directed abusive behavior emerges when supervisors displace or redirect the aggression they feel towards their managers to their subordinates. For our part, we acknowledge that employees’ supervisor–directed aggression can at times be re-directed towards coworkers, customers, family members and friends (e.g., Hoobler & Brass, 2006). However, recent empirical findings suggest that displaced aggression is more likely a consequence of narcissism than paranoia (South, Oltmanns & Turkheimer, 2003). Nevertheless, further research in this direction will help establish more firmly the scope of outcomes that our paranoia-focused framework can address.

Finally, we recognize that perception and reality do not diverge only for employees who are mentally unstable, and that state paranoia is much more prevalent in organizations than has been acknowledged to date (Kramer, 1994, 1998, 2000; Zimbardo, 2003; Zimbardo et al., 1981). We believe that paranoid arousal and paranoid cognition are likely to influence the actions of employees in almost any work setting where they believe that they are being undermined, excluded, ostracized, bullied, harassed, or discriminated against by peers. Furthermore, under conditions of elevated social uncertainty, resource depletion, and isolation from sources of social support, the effects of paranoid arousal and paranoid cognition may be visible in employee responses to less aggressive forms of mistreatment, including incivility and
neglect. As such, we challenge researchers to consider the broader implications of paranoia scholarship for conceptual insight in these domains.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Given the prevalence of employee-reported abuse at work, the detrimental consequences of perceived abusive supervision in particular, and the limited effectiveness of employee responses in dealing with supervisory abuse, organizations must take prudent steps to manage supervisory abuse. Claims of mistreatment and abuse, and the paranoid arousal and thoughts that follow from perceived abuse, often have their source in misunderstanding that is left, un-checked, to escalate over time. Because of this, we see value in equipping employees at all levels to better understand the aspects of interpersonal difference and social distance that make misunderstanding more likely. Thus, for instance, supervisors and subordinates alike stand to benefit from training to understand how aspects of stigmatization and minority status within the organization (e.g., demographic minority) can heighten interpersonal sensitivities and increase the likelihood of people misinterpreting the behaviors of others.

Because interpersonal misunderstanding cannot be completely prevented, prudent organizations incorporate confidential coaching, counseling and mentoring services into their broader diversity management programs. Apart from a clear commitment to diversity that demonstrates deeper support for all employees (e.g., where artificial barriers to career progression for demographic or social minorities are removed, and where the racial and gender profile of the organization’s leadership is representative of its workforce), employees may view these initiatives as lacking authenticity and unlikely to serve their best interests. In organizations that have made credible commitments to their employees and workplace diversity, confidential services such
as coaching, counseling and mentoring are likely to serve their intended purpose of promoting understanding even in the face of acknowledged differences.

Because abusive supervisory treatment does occur and is highly consequential for employees, systems of behavior management are needed that entail clear specification, measurement and reporting of such behavior. That is, organizations must be clear in identifying behaviors that are and are not considered acceptable, and employees and managers alike must be trained to recognize them. Furthermore, organizations need performance management systems for supervisory staff that go well beyond financial and operational KPIs, allowing for reporting of abusive supervisory treatment. Beyond planned reporting through performance management systems, organizations can establish hotlines—direct mechanisms for confidential and/or anonymous reporting of supervisory abuse that is observed (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009).

We recognize that established performance management and reporting systems will only be taken seriously by supervisors and employees when organizations are committed to investigating reported abuse and taking appropriate action (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009). In light of the potential for persistence and escalation of abuse over time, we see wisdom in removing supervisors identified as systemic sources of abuse and replacing them with more enlightened leaders as quickly as possible (Sutton, 2007). We make this recommendation with the knowledge that the indispensability of talented individuals within organizations is often overstated (Groysberg, Nanda & Nohria, 2004) while the total cost of supervisory abuse is often under-estimated (Sutton, 2007).

When allegations of supervisory abuse are episodic rather than systemic in nature, relationship repair through mediation may be possible (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009). In mediation, a neutral third-party facilitates dialogue between the
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perpetrator (abuser) and victim (abused) so that a shared understanding of what took place and the harm that was done can be achieved, and a new basis for working together can be established (Umbreit, Bradshaw, & Coates, 2003). This aspect of relationship restoration may be particularly vital where supervisors and subordinates have to work together even after the abuse and dispute resolution process (Goodstein & Aquino, 2010; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009; Umbreit et al., 2003).

Finally, we recommend prudence in dealing with the aftermath of supervisory abuse. New supervisors should be aware of what has happened in the past so that they can anticipate subordinate concerns. As organizational authorities, supervisors have a role to play in establishing compassionate and caring organizational climates—oases for healing where abused and paranoid employees can get back on their feet and become productive employees once again (Frost, 2003; Lilius, Worline, Maitlis, Kanov, Dutton, & Frost, 2008; Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, & Margolis, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Our theoretical work addresses two key limitations of the existing literature on abusive supervision—limited attention to the social psychological processes that explain employee responses to perceived abuse, and limited explanations for the persistence and escalation of abuse within supervisor-subordinate relations over time. We address both of these issues within the context of a model that explains how abusive supervisor behavior and employee perceptions of supervisory abuse function as both causes and consequences of employee state paranoia. For employees in organizations, activation of paranoid arousal (e.g., high anxiety, fear and distrust) and paranoid cognition (e.g., sinister attribution tendencies, hypervigilance, rumination) provide impetus for supervisor-directed safety behaviors (e.g., avoidance, help seeking, compliance and aggression) and suspicion behaviors as behavioral responses...
to perceived supervisor abuse. Our analysis highlights the fact that, rather than effectively addressing and bringing resolution to the problem of perceived supervisor abuse, employee behavioral responses actually invite abusive treatment from supervisors. Over time and with repeated cycles of interaction, employee state paranoia and supervisory abuse become aligned within a mutually reinforcing cycle that is not broken easily.

Although state paranoia entails highly negative arousal and distorted social cognition, there may be times when employee appraisals of supervisory abuse accurately reflect what is going on. Indeed, Kramer argues that paranoia can be functional precisely because there are times when deep distrust and preoccupation with threat is appropriate (Kramer, 2000, 2002). So understood, an inability and unwillingness to entertain and act upon sinister thoughts concerning the motives and actions of others, may be highly un-adaptive. Thus, Kramer affirms with Andy Grove, CEO of Intel, ‘Only the paranoid survive’ (Grove, 1996; Kramer, 2002). Our more qualified position, recognizing not only that paranoia-induced safety and suspicion behaviors often do more harm than good, is that human beings cannot be expected to thrive or flourish for long within paranoia-inducing contexts of sustained supervisory abuse—such contexts have fundamental and lasting detrimental effects on even the most normal and healthy people.
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FIGURE 1

An Employee-Centered Model of State Paranoia and Abusive Supervision

- Individual Factors
  - Dispositional Paranoia
  - Neuroticism / Negative Affectivity

- Contextual Factors
  - Minority Status
  - Stigmatized Member
  - Work Stress
  - Perceived Organizational Support

- Relational Factors
  - Social Support from Non-supervisor Sources (e.g., co-workers, mentors, family members)
  - Supervisor Support

- Perceived Abusive Supervision
  - Paranoic Arousal
    - Distress
    - Fear/Anxiety
    - Sense of Threat
  - Paranoic Cognition
    - Hypervigilance
    - Rumination
    - Suspect Attribution Tendencies

- Employee Safety Behaviors
  - Avoidance
  - Aggression
  - Compliance
  - Help-seeking

- Employee Suspicion Behaviors

- Supervisor Behaviors
  - Abuse
  - Role-related conflict (e.g., micromanaging, micro-managing, direction)