THE SHORT-LIVED BENEFITS OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISORY BEHAVIOR FOR ACTORS: AN INVESTIGATION OF RECOVERY AND WORK ENGAGEMENT

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Although empirical evidence has accumulated showing that abusive supervision has devastating effects on subordinates’ work attitudes and outcomes, knowledge about how such behavior impacts supervisors who exhibit it is limited. Drawing upon conservation of resources theory, we develop and test a model that specifies how and when engaging in abusive supervisory behavior has immediate benefits for supervisors. Via two experiments and a multi-wave diary study across 10 consecutive workdays, we found that engaging in abusive supervisory behavior was associated with improved recovery level. Moreover, abusive supervisory behavior had a positive indirect effect on work engagement through recovery level. Interestingly, supplemental analyses suggested that these beneficial effects were short-lived because, over longer periods of time (i.e., one week and beyond), abusive supervisory behavior was negatively related to supervisors’ recovery level and engagement. The strength of these short-lived beneficial effects was also bound by personal and contextual factors. Empathic concern—a personal factor—and job demands—a contextual factor—moderated the observed effects. Specifically, supervisors with high empathic concern or low job demands experienced fewer benefits after engaging in abusive supervisory behavior. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, and propose future research directions.

In the last two decades, management scholars have shown increasing interest in destructive behaviors exhibited by supervisors (Tepper, 2000, 2007; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001). As one common form of supervisor destructive behavior, abusive supervision refers to the extent to which supervisors engage in non-physical aggressive behavior toward subordinates (Tepper, 2000). Since the work of Tepper (2000), a multitude of studies have documented pervasive and deleterious effects of abusive supervision on, for example, subordinates’ psychological distress, job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, in-role and extra-role behaviors, and turnover (for reviews, see Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Martinko, Harvey,
Brees, & Mackey, 2013; Tepper, 2007). Indeed, it is clear that abusive supervisory behavior has ramifications for the well-being and performance of subordinates who are exposed to such behavior.

Less clear, however, is whether and in what ways engaging in abusive supervisory behavior impacts supervisors themselves. Although the leadership literature predominantly focuses on the consequences of leader behaviors for recipients, emerging research reveals that leader behaviors also have meaningful effects on actors (Lanaj, Johnson, & Lee, 2016; Lin, Ma, & Johnson, 2016). Unfortunately, the effects that exhibiting abusive behavior may have on supervisors’ own well-being and behavior have mostly been overlooked (for an exception, see Foulk, Lanaj, Tu, Erez, & Archambeau, in press). Exploring such effects is important because knowledge of the potential benefits and costs of abusive supervisory behavior for actors can be leveraged to aid leadership development, which is attracting increased attention from management scholars and practitioners (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005). For example, knowledge of the personal benefits that reinforce abusive supervisory behavior might be used to identify other, less destructive means to help supervisors achieve the same benefits. There is value, then, in examining whether engaging in abusive supervisory behavior affects supervisors, and, if so, why and when such effects are likely to be beneficial.

To address these questions, we adopt an actor-centric perspective to examine the possible beneficial impacts of engaging in abusive supervisory behavior for supervisors. We focus on proximal—or more immediate—consequences of abusive supervisory behavior, as several empirical studies have demonstrated that abusive supervisory behavior fluctuates on a daily basis (Barnes, Lucianetti, Bhave, & Christian, 2015; Courtright, Gardner, Smith, McCormick, & Colbert, 2016; Lin et al., 2016). To understand these fluctuations, we draw upon conservation of resources theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990). Specifically, the literature suggests that coping behaviors elicited by stress, which we argue include abusive supervisory behavior, are more beneficial if they do not create additional stress for actors (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1988), or when actors are in situations characterized by resource scarcity or losses (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993). Accordingly, we extend our theorizing by identifying an individual factor (i.e., empathic concern, or an individual’s tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for others [Davis & Oathout, 1987]) and a situational factor (i.e., job demands, or the extent that work involves physical, social, and psychological aspects requiring sustained effort [Bakker & Demerouti, 2007]) that moderate the benefits of abusive supervisory behavior, as they determine whether abusing subordinates causes additional stress, or whether sufficient resources are available for supervisors.

To test our theoretical model of why and when engaging in abusive supervisory behavior is beneficial for supervisors (see Figure 1), we conducted three studies employing different designs (two experiments and a multi-wave diary study) and samples (Chinese and American). This research provides several key contributions to extant abusive supervision and conservation of resource theories. First, by focusing on supervisors as actors (vs. subordinates as recipients), we answer the fundamental question of “What are proximal beneficial consequences of abusive supervisory behavior for perpetrators?”
Existing literature on abusive supervision primarily focuses on recipients and concludes that abusive supervision is always bad and costly (Foulk et al., in press; Mackey et al., 2017; Martinko et al., 2013; Tepper, 2007). We challenge this prevailing conclusion by suggesting that abusive supervision may actually have some immediate benefits for supervisors, which helps explain why such behavior persists even though it is harmful for subordinates. By integrating an actor-based perspective with conservation of resources theory, it becomes possible to uncover the hidden benefits of abusive supervision in the form of higher recovery level and improved work engagement. Although the literature has hinted at possible actor-based consequences (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994; Tepper, 2007), our study is an initial attempt to explicitly theorize and empirically examine how and when abusive behavior benefits supervisors.

Second, our research further contributes to the abusive supervision literature by exploring boundary conditions under which abusive supervisory behavior is more or less beneficial for supervisors. Doing so offers a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of abusive supervisory behavior on actors. Based on conservation of resources theory, supervisors’ levels of empathic concern and job demands are expected to shape the impacts of abusive behavior on supervisors’ recovery level and engagement. Our findings highlight the importance of taking individual and contextual factors into consideration in the research into how abusive supervisory behavior affects actors. Furthermore, this research expands conservation of resources theory by identifying abusive supervisory behavior, a so-called “bad” behavior, as an important event involving beneficial processes of resource conservation and generation. This extends previous research which has focused exclusively on exploring how so-called “good” behaviors, such as citizenship, voice, and prosocial behaviors, promote resource conservation and generation (Koopman et al., 2016; Lin & Johnson, 2015; Sonnentag & Grant, 2012). We elaborate on these and other contributions in the Discussion section.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

To understand the possible benefits of abusive behavior for supervisors, we draw upon conservation of resources theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), which has proved useful for understanding proximal actor-based consequences of daily behaviors (e.g., Bono et al., 2013; Diestel et al., 2015; Koopman et al., 2016). The primary tenet of conservation of resources theory is that “humans are motivated to protect their current resources and acquire new resources” (Halbesleben et al., 2014: 1335), where resources are “objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued” (Hobfoll, 1989: 516). Resources are valued because they help people meet external demands (e.g., job demands), attain valued goals (e.g., task completion), or protect against future resource loss (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Kiazad, Holtom, Hom, & Newman, 2015; Qin, Direnzo, Xu, & Duan, 2014). This theory highlights how changes in personal resources following work events and behaviors have downstream consequences for individuals’ recovery and work engagement, both of which are sensitive to personal resources (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2010;

Based on conservation of resources theory, we posit that abusive supervisory behavior is one such behavior that may prevent the loss of personal resources and gain new resources for supervisors, enabling them in turn to achieve a sufficient level of recovery. Recovery refers to a process in which individual functional systems, that are called upon during stressful experiences, return to their pre-stressor levels (Craig & Cooper, 1992; Sonnentag et al., 2010), and a high recovery level means feeling physically and mentally refreshed (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2009). Moreover, conservation of resources theory suggests that resource recovery must be experienced in order for employees to be fully engaged in their work (Binnewies et al., 2010; Rich et al., 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Thus, recovery may account for an indirect effect of supervisors’ abusive behavior on their work engagement, which contributes to in-role and extra-role job performance (Christian et al., 2011) and well-being (Bakker et al., 2008). Through this resource perspective, we are able to achieve a coherent picture of the beneficial proximal effects of abusive supervisory behavior on actors.

**Beneficial Effects of Abusive Supervisory Behavior for Actors**

Our theorizing in this paper focuses on the proximal beneficial effects of abusive supervisory behavior for actors. We do this because such behavior fluctuates daily, and these fluctuations often coincide with changes in resource conservation and resource generation (Barnes et al., 2015; Courtright et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2016). Conservation of resources theory has therefore been frequently applied to explain proximal actor-based consequences of daily work behaviors (e.g., Bono et al., 2013; Diestel et al., 2015; Koopman et al., 2016). According to this theory, individuals strive to protect their current resources and acquire new resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), which may in fact be aided by engaging in abusive supervisory behavior for a couple of reasons.

Following a resource conservation argument, abusive supervisory behavior may help supervisors avoid further resource loss. Many common activities of supervisors, such as providing negative feedback, regulating their emotions, and conforming their actions with justice principles, are challenging and drain their available resources (Johnson, Lanaj, & Barnes, 2014; Lin et al., 2016), and thus may become stressors for supervisors. Previous research has found that supervisors are likely to abuse their subordinates when confronted with stress, because stress triggers aggressive needs and impulses (Burton, Hoober, & Scheuer, 2012). Although abuse is a maladaptive interpersonal means for coping with stress, engaging in abusive supervisory behavior may actually prevent further resource loss. As prior literature has argued, all acts of self-control are effortful, require inhibition, and draw on limited resources (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Johnson, Muraven, Donaldson, & Lin, 2017). When conditions trigger aggressive needs and impulses, supervisors must expend resources in order to suppress and inhibit aggressive behavior, as these acts of self-control will consume their resources (Baumeister et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 2017). In other words, suppressing the intention to abuse would lead to further resource loss for supervisors (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Engaging in abusive behavior therefore releases supervisors from the resource-consuming process of behavior inhibition, helping them prevent further resource loss and maintain their current level of recovery.

Additionally, following a resource generation argument, engaging in abusive supervisory behavior may affect supervisors’ recovery by inducing an enhanced sense of control. Specifically, as a result of the power asymmetry between employees and their direct supervisors, abusive supervision typically causes subordinates to avoid any reaction that might trigger further abuse (Kiewitz, Restubog, Shoss, Garcia, & Tang, 2016; Nandkeolyar, Shaffer, Li, Ekkirala, & Bagger, 2014). That is, supervisors’ abusive behavior will effect employee compliance in obeying orders and rules, thus giving them an enhanced sense of control and influence (Felson, 2004). This prediction is consistent with Ruedy, Moore, Gino, and Schweitzer’s (2013) arguments and findings that unethical behavior may confer psychological benefits derived from a sense of greater autonomy and influence. Moreover, effecting compliance and experiencing control can replenish supervisors’ resources by fulfilling basic needs for autonomy and competence (Deci, Ryan, Gagne, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Indeed, existing research provides support for the positive effect of control perceptions on recovery level (e.g., Fritz, Sonnentag, Spector, & Mcinroe, 2010; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

In sum, we propose that abusing subordinates may improve supervisors’ level of recovery by preventing
further resource loss for self-control and gaining new resources through enhanced sense of control. We acknowledge that supervisors can protect and gain resources via other means, and we do not imply that abusing subordinates is the only (or preferred) way to achieve this. Rather, we suggest that refraining from self-control and obtaining control by being abusive may, nevertheless, support recovery.

**Hypothesis 1.** Engaging in abusive supervisory behavior will be positively related to supervisors’ own recovery level.

We further argue that the level of recovery associated with abusive supervisory behavior will affect supervisors’ work engagement, or their investment of physical, cognitive, and emotional energies at work (Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2002). People with high work engagement experience a high level of energy, dedication, and absorption in their work (Bakker et al., 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Sonnentag et al., 2010), and high work engagement aids well-being and in-role and extra-role job performance (Bakker et al., 2008; Christian et al., 2011). Recovery has a positive effect on work engagement because individuals with high levels of resources are more willing to invest effort, more resilient when confronted with stress, and more likely to concentrate fully on the task at hand and to ignore irrelevant cues (Kahn, 1990; Sonnentag, 2003). In contrast, when recovery is insufficient, individuals lack the resources to sustain high effort, cope with stress, and allocate attention across tasks (Sonnentag, 2003). Previous research supports this positive effect of recovery on work engagement (Binnewies et al., 2009; Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag et al., 2010). Because abusive supervisory behavior improves the level of recovery, and because recovery level is a proximal predictor of work engagement, we expect that abusive supervisory behavior has a positive indirect effect on work engagement via recovery level.

**Hypothesis 2.** Abusive supervisory behavior will have a positive indirect effect on work engagement via recovery level.

**Personal and Situational Constraints on the Benefits of Abusive Supervisory Behavior**

Thus far, we have proposed a mechanism—resource recovery—through which abusive behavior may affect supervisors’ work engagement. In this section, based on the resource perspective, we explore the question of when abusive behavior will be more or less beneficial for supervisors. Conservation of resources literature posits that personal and situational characteristics impact individuals’ reactions to the processes of avoiding resource loss and gaining new resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 1990). In particular, individual characteristics and work factors that induce additional stress after events or reflect current levels of resources are relevant to resource conservation and generation processes, and may have implications for the resource-related consequences of abusive supervisory behavior (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 1990).

Specifically, conservation of resources theory suggests that coping events or activities are beneficial so long as they do not create additional stress for actors (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1988). With respect to abusive supervisory behavior, such behavior is likely to cause additional stress when individuals are attuned to others’ well-being (i.e., ones with high empathic concern [Batson, 1991; Davis, 1983]) as it violates social and ethical norms, and causes harm to others. This additionally caused stress will negate the potential recovery benefits of abusive behavior. In addition, conservation of resources theory’s principle of primacy of loss posits that the benefits of recovery are contingent upon whether or not sufficient resources are available (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Wells, Hobfoll, & Lavin, 1997) and resource gains will have greater meaning in contexts of resource losses (Vinokur & Schul, 2002; Wells et al., 1997). Accordingly, when supervisors find themselves in resource-scarce contexts (e.g., ones with high job demands), the beneficial effect of abusive supervisory behavior for recovery will be more salient. Thus, conservation of resources theory suggests that supervisors’ empathic concern and job demands will constrain the recovery processes triggered by abusive supervisory behavior. Below, we describe, based on our theoretical lens, how these moderators are proposed to function in these relationships.

**Moderating role of empathic concern.** Whether or not abusive supervisory behavior helps supervisors conserve and replenish their resources depends on the priority they place on others and on their comfort with exhibiting such behavior, which determine whether abusive behavior creates additional stress. An individual difference variable that captures the prioritizing of others vis-à-vis the self and the comfort with exhibiting abusive behavior is empathic concern, which is “the tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for others” (Davis & Oathout, 1987: 398). Empathic concern is an other-oriented motivation that aims to
increase the well-being of others and involves a sensitivity to the needs and distress of others (Batson, 1991; Davis, 1983, 1996).

Although abusing subordinates may aid recovery by releasing supervisors from the resource-consuming demands of self-control, abusing others is a violation of the personal standards and beliefs of highly empathic supervisors (Davis, 1983). This kind of violation would cause discomfort and additional stress for such supervisors as it threatens their positive self-image of being a highly moral individual (Festinger, 1957). That is, although abusing subordinates may help recovery by releasing supervisors from the resource-consuming demands of self-control, for supervisors with high (vs. low) empathic concern, the additional stress caused by abusive behavior will weaken its benefits for recovery (Hobfoll, 1988). In addition, highly empathic people tend to work toward enhancing the well-being of others (Davis, 1983). Therefore, for highly empathic supervisors, abusing subordinates violates this ingrained tendency, which may signal that they are not in control of their own behavior and the situation. This diminished sense of control will also weaken any recovery benefit that might be experienced from the exhibition of abusive supervisory behavior.

In comparison, for supervisors with low empathic concern, the abuse of subordinates is less likely to be viewed as a violation of personal standards and thus will not cause additional stress and diminish their sense of control. Such supervisors are predominantly focused on the personal benefits of their actions and are insensitive to the impact of their abusive behavior on others (Davis, 1983, 1996). Note that even supervisors with high empathic concern may occasionally engage in abusive behavior toward their subordinates when, for example, they experience strong negative emotions or their resources are depleted (Lin et al., 2016). Therefore, supervisors with high empathic concern will show daily fluctuations in abusive supervisory behavior even though the mean level of abuse should be lower. On days when they display more or less abuse than their typical baseline level (which may be quite low), supervisors’ recovery level will vary.

Based on these arguments, we assert that abusive behavior will have weaker ties to recovery level for supervisors who have high (vs. low) empathic concern. Combining this rationale with the proposed indirect effect of abusive supervisory behavior on work engagement via recovery level, we further propose that empathic concern attenuates this positive indirect effect.

Hypothesis 3a. Empathic concern will moderate the relationship of engaging in abusive supervisory behavior with recovery level, such that the strength of this relationship will be negatively related to empathic concern.

Hypothesis 3b. Empathic concern will moderate the positive indirect effect of engaging in abusive supervisory behavior on work engagement via recovery level, such that the strength of this indirect effect will be negatively related to empathic concern.

**Moderating role of job demands.** Situational characteristics may also influence how supervisors react to their own abusive behavior. One salient and resource-relevant situational characteristic is job demands, defined as “physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007: 312). Given that resources are central to both recovery and demands, we expect that job demands will enhance the positive effect of abusive supervisory behavior on recovery level. According to conservation of resources theory’s principle of primacy of loss, the harm of losing resources outweighs the benefit of gaining resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Taylor, 1991). Importantly, resource gains take on greater meaning in contexts where a greater amount of resources are consumed (Vinokur & Schul, 2002; Wells et al., 1997). In our model, high job demands exemplify such contexts, which make the role of abusive supervisory behavior for resource recovery more salient to supervisors.

Specifically, abusing subordinates may aid recovery level by releasing supervisors from the resource-consuming process of suppressing abusive impulses. This will be especially important for supervisors confronted with high job demands. Supervisors working under high job demands are required to allocate high levels of attention and energy to accomplish a great deal in a short time (Janssen, 2001), and meeting these demands requires substantial resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Thus, avoiding resource-consuming acts of self-control is even more important in order to protect their limited resources and promote recovery. In contrast, it is relatively easy for supervisors under low job demands to complete work activities while maintaining a sufficient level of resources. Thus, there are fewer recovery-based gains by engaging in
abusive supervisory behavior when demands are low.

In addition, earlier we noted that abusing subordinates may have a positive effect on supervisors’ recovery level by inducing a sense of control, which is beneficial for recovery (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). For supervisors confronted with low (vs. high) job demands, the amount and pacing of work is more manageable, and thus it is likely that supervisors will have a relatively high sense of control. Consequently, any impact that abusive supervisory behavior may have on supervisors’ sense of control will be weaker by comparison. In contrast, supervisors experiencing high demands will find it difficult to effectively respond to work requirements, resulting in a relatively low sense of control. In this instance, any act that helps restore supervisors’ sense of control, such as abusive supervisory behavior, will have a larger impact on supervisors’ recovery level.

In sum, we suggest that the positive relationship of abusive supervisory behavior with recovery level will be stronger when job demands are high (vs. low). Furthermore, integrating these arguments and the hypothesis that abusive supervisory behavior has a positive indirect effect on work engagement via recovery level, we propose that job demands enhance this indirect effect.

Hypothesis 4a. Job demands will moderate the relationship of engaging in abusive supervisory behavior with recovery level, such that the strength of this relationship will be positively related to job demands.

Hypothesis 4b. Job demands will moderate the positive indirect effect of engaging in abusive supervisory behavior on work engagement via recovery level, such that the strength of this indirect effect will be positively related to job demands.

Overview of the Current Research

To test our theoretical model depicted in Figure 1, we conducted two experiments (Studies 1a and 1b) and a diary field study (Study 2). The two experiments were designed to establish the causal effect of engaging in abusive supervisory behavior on recovery level. We tested this core effect using two samples from China (Study 1a) and the United States (Study 1b) to verify that it is not culture specific. While these two experimental studies provide robust evidence for the internal validity of this core effect, we employed a multi-level, multi-wave daily diary design in Study 2 to establish the external validity of our full model in a field setting. Considered together, these three studies comprise a mix of different designs and samples that provide a nice combination of internal and external validity evidence for our theoretical model.

STUDY 1A METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants included 64 undergraduate and graduate students from a large university in Northern China. Among them, 67.2% were female, their average age was 22.2 years (standard deviation [SD] = 2.6), they had an average of 16.4 years’ education (SD = 2.5). Each participant was paid a 20 RMB (about 2.9 USD) show-up fee and a 5 RMB (about 0.7 USD) additional bonus. Participants were randomly assigned into one of two conditions (abusive supervision condition, n = 33 vs. control condition, n = 31). Upon arrival at the lab, the experimenter informed participants that this experiment was about coordination in virtual teams. They were then informed that each team would consist of one supervisor and three subordinates and therefore they would work with three other participants (played by confederates recruited and trained by the researchers) from other universities to complete six rounds of tests. After that, they drew lots to decide their roles in the team (unbeknownst to participants, all of the roles written on the slips of paper were supervisors). Consequently, all participants were assigned the role of the supervisor (named as A) while the three subordinates (named as B, C, and D) were played by confederates. During the task, participants and confederates had opportunities to communicate with each other on WeChat, a widely used instant communication tool in China. To communicate, the researchers provided participants with smartphones with the WeChat application and a virtual chat group in WeChat was set up in advance that included the four team members (i.e., labeled as A, B, C, and D). One or two teams participated at a given time. The confederates participated in all the 64 teams and were trained to communicate with all participants in a standard way across all sessions.

After a brief introduction and role assignment, the experimenter gave each participant a smartphone, loaded the virtual group in WeChat, and told participants that they would need to communicate with their team members (B, C, and D) in the chat group (communication instructions were provided later). Participants were then led into separate rooms, and began working on the online experimental task using a local computer.
**Task description.** The task, which comprised a total of six rounds, was adapted from Gino, Norton, and Ariely’s (2010) visual perception task. In each round, participants were shown a set of 10 pictures, one at a time. Each picture contained a rectangle that was divided into two triangles by a diagonal line. Twenty dots were distributed between the two triangles (see the example in Figure 2). Participants had to identify which triangle had more dots than the other. To make the task difficult and create the perception that poor performance is possible, the dots were distributed almost equally across the two triangles, with some dots falling directly on the diagonal.

Participants were informed that team performance would be computed using the average score earned over the six rounds. For each round, the average score was determined by the number of correct answers provided by each participant. However, if any member scored lower than 7 in any round, the team’s average score for that round would be 0, thus it was a conjunctive task in that the team’s performance would be heavily influenced by the poorest performer. After each round, the supervisor received feedback about overall team performance, the scores for each member, and the time spent by each member on the trials. In addition, participants were informed that, as supervisors, they would receive a bonus contingent on the overall performance of the team.

**FIGURE 2**
Example of The Task Used in Studies 1a and 1b

To wit, their economic interests could be harmed if any member performed poorly on the task. Moreover, they were told that they could decide the amount of bonus each team member would get.

To ensure that participants were invested in the supervisor role, we instructed them to use voice messages in the chat group to communicate with their team members before the first round of the test and after the third round. For example, before the first round, participants received the following instruction: “Now, as the leader of this team, please say hello to the three team members and encourage them to work hard in the team tasks.” The confederates (subordinates) replied to the message using simple phrases such as “OK” or “Got it.” These interactions were used to reinforce the believability of the other three virtual team members, and to help participants adjust to the role of supervisor.

**Inducing aggressive intention.** In order to induce participants’ (i.e., supervisors’) hostility toward their subordinates, we fixed the performance of the team in both conditions. Supervisor A, and Subordinates B and D earned more than 7 points on every round, whereas Subordinate C earned less than 7 points in four of the first five rounds. Thus, the overall performance of the team was 0 for four rounds owing to the poor performance of Subordinate C. We also fixed the time each member spent on each round of the test, such that Subordinate C spent far less time on each round compared to the other members. We created circumstances in which the participant (Supervisor A) was likely to feel hostile toward Subordinate C because abusive supervisory behavior usually occurs for a reason (e.g., poor performance [Liang, Lian, Brown, Ferris, Hanig, & Keeping, 2016]). Fixing Subordinate C’s performance to be poor helped ensure that our manipulation of abusive supervision (described below) was more natural and real for participants. More importantly, this design is aligned with our theoretical argument that supervisors consume resources when they have to suppress abusive impulses and negative emotions (Johnson et al., 2017).

**Abusive supervision manipulation.** We manipulated abusive supervision after the fifth round of the test. Participants were instructed to communicate with their subordinates about the performance of the team in the chat group. They had to first report the overall performance of the team as instructed, and then comment on the subordinate (i.e., C) who had the poorest performance in the team. In the abusive supervision condition, participants were instructed to be a “harsh” supervisor by using various sentences...
when commenting on Subordinate C. These sentences included “Your scores are bringing the team down!,” “The tasks are very easy, are you stupid?,” “I really doubt your ability and value to the team!,” “Use your head in the following task!,” and “If you don’t catch up, I will make sure you get NO reward!”

In the control condition, participants were instructed to be a “neutral” supervisor, using sentences such as “Your scores were not very good, this may affect the team performance,” “Please take more time when doing the tests,” “Let’s all be more careful and try to get higher scores,” “I hope you will pay more attention in the task that follows,” and “If we all work harder, we can get extra rewards.”

Importantly, although we provided these example sentences to participants, we did not require them to only use these sentences. Instead, we encouraged them to act in the styles manifested by the example sentences and express themselves in a more natural way. In addition, they did say other sentences besides the examples when communicating with their subordinates. For example, a message that a participant in the abusive supervisor condition sent to Subordinate C was:

Member C, you had the lowest scores through the entire series of tests. Our team get 0 points in four of the five rounds of tests all because of your low scores. All you have been doing is dragging the whole team down! I really doubt your ability! You have to be more careful and work harder! Do not forget that it is up to me whether or not you get a bonus. If this continues, I will make sure you get nothing at all!

In contrast, an example message that a participant in the control condition sent to Subordinate C was:

Member C, it appears your scores have not been too great for the last 5 rounds, and it is affecting our overall performance as a team. I see that your average time per round is relatively low, all around 40 seconds for each round, while others spent about 70 seconds. I think you should be able to spend a few more seconds on each round. Remember our reward is based on what everyone receives, so if we all work harder, we can get a larger reward in the end.

Thus, it appeared that participants embraced the role of being either an abusive or neutral supervisor.

After participants communicated with their subordinates, they finished the sixth round and, following that, completed a post-experiment questionnaire that included a measure of recovery and a manipulation check. The questionnaire was conducted in Mandarin Chinese. In line with prior studies (e.g., Qin, Ren, Zhang, & Johnson, 2015), we followed a translation-back translation procedure (Brislin, 1980) to translate scales that were not originally developed in Mandarin Chinese. At the conclusion of the session, we conducted a post-experiment debriefing (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000), asking participants if they were aware of the manipulation or the study purpose (none of them guessed the purpose).

**Measures**

**Recovery level.** Recovery level was measured using Sonnenstag’s (2003) three-item scale (α = .74). A sample item is “I feel relaxed.” Participants responded to these and all other items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree,” 5 = “Strongly agree”).

**Manipulation check.** Participants rated the extent to which they were verbally abusive to Subordinate C using Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) five-item version of Tepper’s (2000) abusive supervision scale (α = .85). A sample item is “In the message, I told C he/she was incompetent.”

**STUDY 1A RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Manipulation Check**

Results from a t-test revealed that participants in the abusive supervision condition (M = 3.00, SD = .90) rated their abusive behavior higher than those in the control condition (M = 2.03, SD = .61), t(62) = 5.01, p < .001), Cohen’s d = 1.25. We also invited two independent research assistants who were blind to this study’s hypotheses and conditions to code participants’ abusive supervisory behavior based on the voice messages participants sent to Member C using Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) five-item abusive supervision scale (α = .93, .91, respectively). The two coders’ scores achieved a high reliability (r = .93, p < .001), thus we averaged them to form an overall score. Results from a t-test revealed that abusive supervisory behavior was rated higher in the abusive supervision condition (M = 2.80, SD = 1.00) than in the control condition (M = 1.47, SD = .41), t(62) = 6.88, p < .001, Cohen’s d = 1.72. Based on these findings, we deem our manipulation successful.

**Tests of the Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1 proposes that abusive supervisory behavior is positively related to supervisors’ recovery level. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) results revealed that participants in the abusive supervision
condition ($M = 3.53, SD = .69$) experienced significantly higher levels of recovery than those in the control condition ($M = 3.11, SD = .61$), $F(1, 62) = 6.52, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .10$. Thus, Hypothesis 1 received support in Study 1a.

Although the findings of this experiment suggest that engaging in abusive behavior can aid recovery, this study is limited in two respects. First, university students comprised the Study 1a sample. While the task setting was conducive for students and they appeared to be involved in the roles of supervisors, they lack actual experience supervising subordinates in the workplace. It would therefore be beneficial to examine whether actual supervisors react similarly in an experimental setting. Second, although our theoretical arguments are not culture specific, we used a Chinese sample in this study. We expect that the effect of abusive supervisory behavior on recovery level will generalize to other cultures, yet it is possible that the observed effect may be more likely to emerge in high power distance cultures like China where supervisors may believe that verbally abusing subordinates is justifiable (Hofstede, 2001). To redress these limitations, we conducted a second experiment to replicate the findings of Study 1a using a sample of American participants holding managerial positions.

**STUDY 1B METHOD**

**Participants and Procedure**

We recruited 100 supervisors employed in the United States via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) in exchange for 3 USD and the opportunity to earn a 1 USD bonus. Specifically, we posted a link to our online experiment on MTurk and informed participants that they were required to complete the experiment using a computer because the task required a great deal of typing. Among participants, 49% were male, 77% were Caucasian, 14% were African American and Hispanic/Latino, 7% were Asian, and 2% did not indicate their race. They had an average age of 35.6 years ($SD = 9.1$), an average education of 15.5 years ($SD = 2.5$), and an average tenure of 6.10 years ($SD = 4.8$) in their current supervisory position. Participants were from different industries including manufacturing (5%), service (46%), and others (49%). In addition, they were in a variety of departments, including technology (21%), administration (33%), finance (14%), marketing (6%), and others (26%).

Participants were randomly assigned into one of two conditions (abusive supervision condition, $n = 51$ vs. control condition, $n = 49$). The experiment used the same task as in Study 1a, with the main difference being that participants (who again were ostensibly randomly assigned to be the supervisor) were required to communicate with their subordinates by typing text messages in blank text boxes that appeared on their computer screens. They were told that these text messages would be automatically sent to their subordinates. But, in fact, the subordinates did not really exist. After participants sent their messages, the experiment system displayed some simple and standard feedback messages ostensibly from the subordinates that were set in advance by the experimenter. The same measures of recovery ($\alpha = .89$) and abusive supervision manipulation check ($\alpha = .95$) were used as in Study 1a. As before, participants generated additional texts that corresponded to their assigned condition. For example, a participant in the abusive supervision condition wrote the following message:

Member C, remember we have to work hard together and please use your head in the following task! Also, if you do not catch up, I will ensure you get nothing buddy. This is all very easy but you are doing horribly. And it is simple: your scores are too low and you are bringing the score of all of us down! Shape up or ship out!

In contrast, a participant in the control condition wrote the following:

Member C, your scores were not very good on most of the rounds. Please take more time on doing the rounds and concentrate and not rush. Let’s all be more careful so we will get good scores. I expect you [to] do better on this round. If we work harder and get good scores, we will have higher chances to get rewards. You can do this, Member C.

**STUDY 1B RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Manipulation Check**

Results from a $t$-test revealed that participants in the abusive supervision condition ($M = 2.66, SD = 1.22$) rated their abusive behavior higher than those in the control condition ($M = 1.75, SD = .87$), $t(98) = 4.30, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = .86$. As before, two independent research assistants who were blind to this study’s hypotheses and conditions coded participants’ abusive supervisory behavior based on their messages using the same five-item scale as in Study 1a (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; $\alpha = .90, .92$, respectively). The two coders’ scores achieved a high inter-rater reliability ($r = .92, p < .001$), thus we averaged them to form an overall score. Results from a $t$-test revealed that abusive supervisory behavior was...
rated higher in the abusive supervision condition ($M = 3.06, SD = 1.63$) than in the control condition ($M = 1.63, SD = .36$), $t(98) = 9.24, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.85$. Based on these findings, we deem our manipulation successful.

Tests of the Hypotheses

ANOVA results revealed that supervisors in the abusive supervision condition ($M = 3.69, SD = .99$) experienced significantly higher levels of recovery compared to those in the control condition ($M = 3.14, SD = 1.14$). $F(1,98) = 6.56, p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported, this time with a sample of American supervisors. Together, Studies 1a and 1b provide compelling internal validity evidence for the focal effect of abusive supervision on recovery. We extend these findings in the next study by conducting a multi-wave diary field study across 10 consecutive workdays to test our full theoretical model that included the distal outcome (work engagement) and moderators (empathic concern and job demands).

STUDY 2 METHOD

Participants and Procedures

In Study 2, for both theoretical and empirical reasons, we utilized a multilevel, multiday diary design. Theoretically, conservation of resources theory is a dynamic theory, as resource levels ebb and flow both between and within individuals (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2017). Furthermore, our focus in this research is on proximal consequences of abusive supervisory behavior, which necessitates a daily diary design. Our methodology is therefore appropriate, given the theoretical lens we use and the nature of the focal phenomena in our model. It is also appropriate from an empirical standpoint because supervisory behaviors vary daily (e.g., Barnes et al., 2015; Courtright et al., 2016; Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, & Chang, 2012; Lanaj et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2016).

We recruited our participants through alumni networks of several large universities in China. Using this method, we invited the participation of supervisors working in various industries and positions, thereby bolstering the external validity of our findings. We initially invited 89 supervisors who had at least one subordinate. They were given three books as compensation—one each from management, sociology, and social psychology—valued at 11 USD. As further incentive for participation, we offered to provide feedback about the study results after completion of data collection. To improve data quality, we additionally emphasized the importance of receiving truthful responses from all participants. Seventy-two supervisors responded with valid data (for a response rate of 80.9%). Of these supervisors, 45.8% were female, with an average age of 29.6 years ($SD = 4.3$), an average education of 17.2 years ($SD = 2.2$), an average managerial tenure of 3.1 years ($SD = 3.2$), and an average workday of 8.9 hours per day ($SD = 1.6$). Participants were in a variety of departments, including technology (16.7%), administration (12.5%), marketing (45.8%), and others (25.0%). A range of industries were represented: manufacturing (23.6%), service (20.8%), education and public management (16.7%), and others (38.9%). On average, supervisors had seven subordinates. Our final sample of 72 supervisors did not differ significantly on individual characteristics (e.g., gender, age, education, and tenure) from the 17 supervisors who did not provide complete data.

We sent participants links to the surveys via WeChat. All the surveys were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and the English scales were translated into Mandarin Chinese following Brislin’s (1980) translation–back translation procedure. We collected data over a period of four weeks, which was divided into three phases. In Phase 1, we sent an initial survey to participants, asking them to report their demographic information and job demands. In Phase 2 (one week after the initial one-time survey), we collected daily data twice a day for 10 consecutive workdays. In Phase 3 (one week after the daily surveys), participants completed a final one-time survey that included a measure of empathic concern. We separated the first and last (one-time) surveys to control the length of each survey, thus limiting participant fatigue and increasing response rates. Empathic concern was assessed in the final one-time survey because it is stable and unlikely to be affected by the daily surveys (Davis & Franzoi, 1991).

Following prior daily studies (e.g., Barnes et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2014), the daily portion of the study in the second phase was conducted across 10 consecutive workdays (i.e., from Monday to Friday for two weeks). Two weeks provide a relatively stable and generalizable reflection of social life (Reis & Wheeler, 1991). During this phase, participants were sent two surveys each day, and were required to complete both daily surveys to provide one full day-level observation. We chose to send the morning survey (T1) at 11 AM because participants would have already worked for several hours by this point, and would have had opportunities to display supervisory
behaviors. Participants reported their abusive supervisory behavior, recovery level, negative affect, and positive affect on the morning survey. The afternoon survey (T2), sent at 4:30 PM, assessed participants’ recovery level and work engagement. The time lag between morning and afternoon surveys allowed us to examine change in recovery level and to establish temporal separation and causal precedence between the predictor and outcome variables (Brewer, 2000). The average lapsed time between the morning and afternoon surveys was 6.1 hours. We obtained 565 complete daily observations (both surveys on a given day) out of a possible 720, for a response rate of 78.5%.

**Daily (Within-person) Measures**

**Abusive supervisory behavior (T1).** We measured abusive supervisory behavior using the same five-item abusive supervision scale used in Studies 1a and 1b (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Following prior research (e.g., Courtright et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2012), supervisors self-reported their behavior because they are in the best position to know how they treated all subordinates on a given day. In contrast, a single subordinate is not privy to all instances of leader behavior. Berry, Carpenter, and Barratt’s (2012) meta-analysis also revealed that there was a moderate to high correlation between self- and other-reports of counterproductive work behavior as well as similar patterns and magnitudes of relationships with a set of common correlates. This evidence suggests that self- and other-reports of abusive supervision likely overlap, especially at the daily level (see Lin et al., 2016). More importantly, despite that the self-report measure may be biased due to supervisors’ social desirability, this should not affect the results because we group-mean centered abusive supervision and thus our results represent within-person variation (i.e., what happens when supervisors engage in more or less abusive behavior than what they usually exhibit). Although average levels of abusive behavior may be understated due to, for example, social desirability reasons, the within-person variance in abusive behavior from one day to the next is still meaningful (e.g., Butts, Becker, & Boswell, 2015). In this sense, social desirability is not a serious concern in our study. Supervisors reported how often they exhibited each abusive behavior (e.g., “I ridiculed my subordinates” and “I told my subordinates their thoughts or feelings were stupid”) since arriving at work that day (1 = “Never,” 5 = “Always”). The average α across days was .93.

**Recovery level (T2).** We used Sonnentag’s (2003) three-item scale to measure recovery level on the afternoon survey. Participants reported their level of recovery on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree,” 5 = “Strongly agree”). A sample item is “I feel relaxed.” The average α across days was .96.

**Work engagement (T2).** We measured work engagement using a three-item scale adapted by Lanaj, Johnson, and Barnes (2014) from the short-form Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Participants indicated their agreement with the item statements since the last survey (1 = “Strongly disagree,” 5 = “Strongly agree”). A sample item is “I forgot everything else around me.” The average α across days was .94.

**Between-person Moderators**

**Empathic concern.** We measured empathic concern using a seven-item subscale of Davis’ (1980) shortened version of the Empathy Scale. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements (1 = “Strongly disagree,” 5 = “Strongly agree”). Sample items are “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them” and “I am often quite touched by things that I see happen” (α = .92).

**Job demands.** Job demands were measured using eight items developed by Van Veldhoven and Meijman (1994). Participants indicated their agreement with the statements (1 = “Strongly disagree,” 5 = “Strongly agree”). Sample items are “I have to work fast” and “I have to work extra hard to finish a task” (α = .81).

**Control Variables**

**Recovery level (T1).** We controlled for initial recovery level on the morning survey (T1) in order to model change in recovery level as predicted by abusive supervisory behavior (T1). Initial recovery level was measured using the same scale as described above. The average α across days was .94.

**Analytic Strategy**

Because our study utilized a nested design (multiple days nested within supervisors), we ran analyses using random coefficient modeling with Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM; Bryk, Raudenbush & Congdon, 1996) to test our hypotheses. This method takes into account the interdependence of both levels. The within-individual variables (abusive supervisory behavior,
recovery level, and work engagement) were modeled at Level 1, and the between-person cross-level moderators (empathic concern and job demands) were modeled at Level 2. As recommended by Hofmann, Griffin, and Gavin (2000), and following previous research (e.g., Butts et al., 2015; Koopman et al., 2016), we used group-mean centering for all Level 1 variables in order to examine daily within-person fluctuation while controlling for between-person confounds. All Level 2 variables were grand-mean centered.

We used RMediation (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011) to test the indirect effect, which estimates Type I error rates more accurately and is more powerful than traditional mediation tests (e.g., the Sobel test; MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007). Moreover, to test the first-stage moderated mediation hypotheses, we adopted Edwards and Lambert’s (2007) moderated path analysis approach for calculating conditional indirect effects of the predictors on the outcomes via mediators at high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of the moderators. This method is preferable over other approaches (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986), and delineates how moderation of indirect and direct effects can be combined to assess moderation of the total effect (Edwards & Lambert, 2007).

**STUDY 2 RESULTS**

Before testing our hypotheses, we ran a series of null models in HLM to examine whether there was sufficient within-person variance for each construct in our model. The results indicated that 32% of the variance in abusive supervisory behavior resided at the within-person level. For recovery, the proportions of within-person variation were 50% and 47% at T1 and T2, respectively. Finally, the proportion of within-person variation for work engagement was 49%. These variance decomposition results corroborated the need for multilevel modeling, and indicated that there was sufficient within-individual variance in our data.

Reported in Table 1 are the within-person (Level 1) and between-person (Level 2) correlations among the study variables. Before testing hypotheses, we conducted a multi-level confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which included four within-person variables—abusive supervisory behavior (T1), recovery level (T1 and T2), and work engagement (T2)—and two between-person variables—empathic concern and job demands. Results revealed that the 6-factor model had acceptable fit ($\chi^2(155) = 483.54, p < .001$; standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = .07, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .06, comparative fit index [CFI] = .90; Hu & Bentler, 1999) and fit better than alternative models (e.g., a 5-factor model that combined recovery level (T1) and (T2), $\chi^2(160) = 1369.78, p < .001$; SRMR = .10, RMSEA = .12, CFI = .63; $\Delta \chi^2 = 886.24, \Delta df = 5, p < .001$; a 5-factor model that combined recovery level (T2) and work engagement (T2), $\chi^2(160) = 954.77, p < .001$; SRMR = .08, RMSEA = .09, CFI = .75; $\Delta \chi^2 = 471.23, \Delta df = 5, p < .001$; a full report of these results is available from the authors upon request). Together, these results are encouraging with respect to the discriminant validity of our focal variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1 variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Recovery level (T1)</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Abusive supervisory behavior (T1)</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Recovery level (T2)</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.14***</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Work engagement</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.48***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 2 variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Empathic concern</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Job demands</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: n = 565 at the individual-day level, n = 72 at the individual level. Correlations for Level 1 variables represent group-mean centered relationships among the daily variables at the within-person level of analysis. Level 1 variables were neither centered nor aggregated to provide estimates of between-person relationships with Level 2 variables.

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001
Tests of the Hypotheses

The results from our tests of Hypotheses 1 and 2 are reported in Tables 2 and 3. In support of Hypothesis 1, daily abusive supervisory behavior was positively related to daily recovery level ($b = .27, p < .05$). Hypothesis 2 predicts that abusive supervisory behavior has a positive indirect effect on work engagement via recovery level. As shown in Table 3, daily recovery level was significantly related to daily work engagement ($b = .44, p < .001$). RMediation was used to test the indirect effect by multiplying the path coefficient from daily abusive supervision to daily recovery level with the path coefficient from daily recovery level to daily work engagement, and results revealed that the indirect effect was significant (estimate = .12, 95% confidence interval [CI] = .02, .22). To reduce concerns owing to common method bias, we reran these tests using work engagement scores from the next day. These results were comparable in terms of regression coefficients and significance levels to those reported in the main text (detailed results are available from the authors upon request). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3a predicts that the relationship of abusive supervisory behavior with recovery level is stronger when empathic concern is low (vs. high). As shown in Table 4, there was a significant interaction predicting recovery level ($b = -.65, p < .01$). This interaction, which is depicted in Figure 3, was such that the relationship of abusive supervision with recovery level was significant and positive when empathic concern was low ($b = .56, p < .001$) but nonsignificant when empathic concern was high ($b = -.14, n.s.$). Thus, Hypothesis 3a was supported. Hypothesis 3b posits that empathic concern moderates the indirect effect of engaging in abusive supervisory behavior on work engagement via recovery level. The

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**TABLE 2**
HLM Results for Predictors of Recovery Level in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Recovery Level (T2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery level (T1)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive supervisory behavior (T1)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between-person variance</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-person variance</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
<td>956.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: $n = 565$ at the individual-day level, $n = 72$ at the individual level. Model deviance = $-2 \times \log$-likelihood of the full maximum-likelihood estimate.

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

---

**TABLE 3**
HLM Results for Predictors of Work Engagement in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Total Effects Model</th>
<th>Indirect Effects Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery level (T1)</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive supervisory behavior (T1)</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery level (T2)</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between-person variance</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-person variance</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
<td>905.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: $n = 565$ at the individual-day level, $n = 72$ at the individual level. Model deviance = $-2 \times \log$-likelihood of the full maximum-likelihood estimate.

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$
conditional indirect effects were calculated in multi-level regression to estimate the indirect effects of abusive supervisory behavior on engagement via recovery level at high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of empathic concern. Results indicated that the indirect effect was significant when empathic concern was low \((b = .20, p < .01)\), but not when it was high \((b = −.06, \text{n.s.})\). The difference between these indirect effects was significant \((Δb = −.27, p < .05)\). Hypothesis 3b therefore received support.

Hypothesis 4a predicts that the relationship of abusive supervisory behavior with recovery is stronger when job demands are high (vs. low). As shown in Table 4 and illustrated in Figure 4, this interaction was significant \((b = .72, p < .01)\). Simple slope tests indicated that the relationship of abusive behavior with recovery level was significant and positive when job demands were high \((b = .58, p < .001)\), but not when they were low \((b = −.16, \text{n.s.})\). Thus, Hypothesis 4a was supported. Hypothesis 4b predicts that job demands moderate the indirect effect of abusive supervisory behavior on work engagement via recovery level. Results showed that the indirect effect was significant and positive when job demands were high \((b = .25, p < .01)\), but not when they were low \((b = −.07, \text{n.s.})\). The difference between these indirect effects was significant \((Δb = .32, p < .05)\). Thus, Hypothesis 4b was supported.

We conducted one set of analyses to test the robustness of our results. Although mean-centering all daily variables at the person level helps remove between-person confounds such as stable traits, in order to further eliminate demographics as confounds in the relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and recovery or engagement, we reran analyses in which gender, age, education, and managerial tenure were controlled for. These results were comparable to those reported above (a detailed report of these results is available from the authors upon request).

Supplementary Analyses: Long-term Effects of Abusive Supervisory Behavior

Consistent with conservation of resources theory, we found that, in the short-term, engaging in abusive supervisory behavior promoted resource conservation and creation, thus bolstering daily work engagement. However, numerous studies suggest that abusive supervision is detrimental in the long term because such behavior eventually degrades supervisor–subordinate relationships (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012), incites retaliation from subordinates (Liu, Kwan, Wu, & Wu, 2010), and reduces subordinates’ task and citizenship behaviors (Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). As a result, abusive supervisors engender decreased trust, support, and productivity from their subordinates, which are important resources for supervisors to effectively meet their job demands (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Thus, while there

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Recovery Level (T2)</th>
<th>Work Engagement (T2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>(SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery level (T1)</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abusive supervisory behavior (T1)</td>
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<td>Recovered level (T2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathic concern</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abusive supervisory behavior (T1) × Empathic concern</td>
<td>−0.65</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job demands</td>
<td>−0.14</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive supervisory behavior (T1) × Job demands</td>
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<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between-person variance</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within-person variance</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
<td>936.30</td>
<td>879.84</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Notes: \(n = 565\) at the individual-day level, \(n = 72\) at the individual level. Model deviance = \(-2 \times \log\)-likelihood of the full maximum-likelihood estimate.

\(*p < .10\)

\(**p < .05**

\(***p < .01\)

\(****p < .001\)
may be short-term recovery benefits owing to abusive supervisory behavior, a different picture may emerge in the long term.

Accordingly, we conducted a series of supplementary analyses to explore longer-term consequences of abusive supervisory behavior. First, we measured participants’ average abusive supervisory behavior during the past three months on the initial one-time survey using Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) five-item abusive supervision scale ($\alpha = .86$).

If cumulative abusive supervision is indeed detrimental, then a negative relationship of average abusive supervision over time with supervisors’ subsequent recovery might be expected. To test this possibility, we regressed afternoon recovery level on average abusive supervisory behavior from the initial one-time survey using HLM, and results indicated a significant negative relationship ($b = -.31, p < .05$). RMediation further revealed that average abusive supervisory behavior in the initial survey
had a significant negative impact on afternoon work engagement via afternoon recovery level (estimate = −.14, 95% CI = −.26, −.02). These findings offer initial evidence that prior cumulative abusive supervisory behavior is detrimental for supervisors’ long-term recovery and work engagement (the predictor–
outcome time lags ranged from seven to 19 days).

Second, we tested the impacts of abusive supervisory behavior from the initial one-time survey on afternoon recovery and work engagement on the final day of the second week (i.e., Day 10; the predictor–outcome time lag was 19 days). Results based on Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression revealed that average abusive supervisory behavior in the initial survey was negatively related to Day 10 recovery (b = −.57, p < .01) as well as Day 10 work engagement via Day 10 recovery (estimate = −.34, 95% CI = −.66, −.09). Note that we controlled for supervisor gender, age, education, managerial tenure, empathic concern, and job demands when running these regression models.

As another way to assess the longer-term impacts of abusive supervisory behavior, we averaged participants’ abusive behavior from the first workweek (i.e., the first five days) and used this average score to predict recovery and engagement at Day 10. Although engaging in abusive supervision is beneficial for recovery and engagement on the same day, doing so may harm recovery and engagement in the following week. Note that for this lagged analysis we used the same daily variables as we did for our focal tests of the short-term effects of abusive supervisory behavior. OLS regression results (again controlling for supervisor gender, age, education, managerial tenure, empathic concern, and job demands) revealed that average abusive supervisory behavior during the first week had a negative impact on Day 10 recovery level (b = −.41, p < .05) and a significant negative indirect effect on Day 10 work engagement via Day 10 recovery level (estimate = −.26, 95% CI = −.53, −.05).1 These results suggest that the beneficial effects of abusive supervisory behavior are short-lived and eventually break bad in as little as a week’s time, as exemplified by the longer-term decrements in recovery, engagement, and dissatisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Drawing upon conservation of resources theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), we developed and tested a model explaining how and when engaging in abusive supervisory behavior affects supervisors’ resource recovery and work engagement. Findings from two experiments and a multi-wave diary field study revealed that engaging in abusive supervisory behavior had short-lived beneficial effects of aiding supervisors’ recovery and, in turn, their work engagement on that day. Moreover, these effects were constrained by personal and situational factors, such that abusive supervisory behavior aided short-term recovery and engagement only when supervisors had low empathic concern or high job demands. Interestingly, supplementary results revealed that engaging in abusive supervisory behavior had detrimental longer-term effects on supervisors’ recovery, engagement, and satisfaction.

Implications for Theory

Our research makes several key theoretical contributions to abusive supervision and conservation of resources literatures. First, by showing how abusive supervisory behavior indirectly affects supervisors’ work engagement through recovery level, our study broadens understanding of the consequences of abusive supervision. While previous studies have established the impacts of abusive supervision on subordinates (for reviews, see Mackey et al., 2017; Martinko et al., 2013; Tepper, 2007), the impacts of engaging in abusive supervisory behavior for supervisors themselves has been largely overlooked. Moreover, previous work, including limited research on actor-based effects of abusive supervisory behavior (Foulk et al., in press), has emphasized the detrimental side of abusive supervision, concluding that it is always bad and costly. However, we question this prevailing belief by suggesting that abusive supervision may entail some short-term benefits for supervisors. Identifying recovery level as the mechanism allows us to link abusive supervisory behavior to actor-based outcomes (i.e., work engagement) through a resource perspective. In support of our theory, we found that engaging in abusive supervision

1 A final supplementary analysis included job satisfaction measured with a single item (“How satisfied are you with your job in general?” [Wanous, Reichers, & Hurdy, 1997]) on the second one-time survey as an outcome. Based on OLS regression results, we found that average abusive supervisory behavior assessed on the initial one-time survey had a significant negative indirect effect on job satisfaction via Day 10 recovery level (estimate = −.25, 95% CI = −.53, −.05). We also found that average daily abusive supervisory behavior across the first five workdays had a significant negative indirect effect on job satisfaction via Day 10 recovery level (estimate = −.14, 95% CI = −.33, −.01).
had a positive indirect effect on supervisors’ work engagement through their recovery level.

Interestingly, the beneficial effects we observed appeared short-lived because, over longer periods of time (i.e., one week and beyond), average levels of abusive supervision were negatively related to supervisors’ recovery and engagement. This finding is reasonable and consistent with previous research. Specifically, although subordinates may not immediately confront their supervisors following their abusive behavior, over time they react in negative ways by, for example, engaging in supervisor-directed counterproductive and aggressive behaviors (Lian, Brown, Ferris, Liang, Keeping, & Morrison, 2014; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), reducing their citizenship behaviors (Zellars et al., 2002), and exiting the organization (Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Geider, Hu, & Hua, 2009). Over time, then, abusive supervisors will experience decreased trust, support, and productivity from subordinates, which are critical resources for their recovery and engagement (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Although engaging in abusive supervision may generate some immediate benefits for supervisors, it is detrimental for both supervisors and the subordinates over the long term. Similarly, when supervisors have enough time and chances to ruminate their experiences of abusing subordinates, abusive supervisory behavior may harm supervisors’ well-being (Foulk et al., in press). Our finding highlights the critical importance of taking the window of time into account when exploring abusive supervisory behavior, because length of time dictates whether such behavior is beneficial or detrimental for actors. Taken together, our findings indicate that the consequences of abusive supervision are more complex and nuanced than what the extant literature suggests.

Second, our research further contributes to the abusive supervision literature by revealing when abusive supervisory behavior is more or less beneficial (in terms of recovery and engagement) for supervisors. For a comprehensive understanding of the effects of abusive supervisory behavior on actors, it is important to go beyond merely examining its consequences and to explore the boundary conditions under which abusive behavior has stronger or weaker impacts on actors (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Whetten, 1989). Based on conservation of resources theory, we found that the extent to which abusive supervisory behavior promoted recovery and engagement depended on both individual (i.e., empathic concern) and contextual (i.e., job demands) factors. Specifically, abusive supervisory behavior benefits recovery and engagement more when supervisors have low (vs. high) empathic concern. Thus, for supervisors with high empathic concern, engaging in abusive behavior produces additional resource loss that negates any potential short-term resource protection and replenishing effect. In addition, the resource conservation and replenishing effects of abusive behavior also hinge on how stressful or demanding supervisors’ jobs are. We found that the beneficial effects of abusive supervisory behavior on recovery and engagement were stronger for supervisors confronted with high (vs. low) job demands. Thus, abusive behavior may be one means through which supervisors conserve their limited resources and maintain a high level of recovery and sense of control in stressful situations.

Third, while conservation of resources theory provides a useful lens through which to view the actor-based effects of abusive supervisory behavior, the current research also gives back to this theory. Specifically, we expand the scope of conservation of resources theory by identifying abusive supervisory behavior as an important behavior involving resource conservation and generation processes. Previous research has focused on so-called “good” behaviors (e.g., citizenship, voice, and prosocial behaviors; Koopman et al., 2016; Lin & Johnson, 2015; Sonnentag & Grant, 2012), finding that these “good” behaviors help individuals’ recovery through resource conservation and generation processes. However, we theorized and found that despite abusive supervisory behavior being a so-called “bad” behavior, such behavior can also aid recovery via resource conservation and generation processes. More importantly, we found that abusive supervisory behavior helped protect and build supervisors’ resources in the short term, but it consumed supervisors’ resources in the long term. Thus, whether a particular behavior is resource-generating or resource-consuming may depend on the window of time considered. Therefore, window of time should be incorporated into conservation of resources theory as a key boundary condition. Future research invoking this theory may take window of time into account in their theoretical exploration.

In addition, as pointed out by Halbesleben et al. (2014), while conservation of resources theory is dynamic by nature, prior research invoking this theory has mostly overlooked the roles of time and change. In line with recent studies (e.g., Bono et al., 2013; Koopman et al., 2016), our research also expands the scope of this theory by examining a prevalent daily phenomenon that has implications for...
supervisors’ personal resources. In addition, previous research taking a resource perspective has suggested that supervisors are more likely to abuse subordinates as a result of lack of resources (Barnes et al., 2015; Courtright et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2016; Yam, Fehr, Keng-Highberger, Klotz, & Reynolds, 2016). However, past research has not considered how acts of abuse subsequently affect the resources of supervisors. Thus, by revealing how abusive supervision affect supervisors’ resources (in terms of recovery level), our research adds to previous studies to form a more comprehensive resource-based understanding of abusive supervision.

Implications for Practice

Our research findings provide several important managerial implications. Most importantly, our research sheds light on one possible reason why supervisors engage in abusive supervisory behavior, despite its destructive consequences for subordinates and supervisor–subordinate relations. Specifically, abusive behavior may, at least in the short term (i.e., within a day), help supervisors conserve and gain resources by freeing them from the depleting act of suppressing negative and aggressive impulses and inducing a sense of control. These resource savings and gains can then be dedicated to the job in the form of greater work engagement. Given that abusive supervisory behavior has detrimental impacts on subordinates, engaging in such behavior is not a first choice for resource recovery. In fact, there are alternative options for conserving and gaining resources that do not have detrimental effects on subordinates. For example, research on workday breaks shows that activities that are preferred and breaks taken earlier in the work shift are positively related to post-break recovery (Hunter & Wu, 2016). It implies that supervisors could also recover resources by engaging in workday breaks with certain characteristics. In addition, supervisors should be encouraged to engage in more communications with their coworkers. Communications with coworkers may help supervisors obtain higher recovery levels by releasing negative emotions through sharing, receiving social support, and gaining relational energy from their coworkers (Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016).

Our findings also showed that abusing subordinates was not beneficial for supervisors with high empathic concern. Because people differ in their tendency to experience other-oriented feelings of sympathy and compassion (Davis & Oathout, 1987), and because those with higher empathic concern are more likely to experience discomfort when they act in ways that harm others, organizations may select supervisors with high empathic concern or try to cultivate empathic concern through training and socialization. Under such circumstances, whenever supervisors engage in abusive behavior, they will feel upset or stressed afterward, and consequently should avoid acting that way in the future.

Finally, we found that supervisors’ perceptions of job demands moderated the positive relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and recovery level, such that this relationship existed only when perceived job demands were high (vs. low). Supervisors under high job demands are faced with large workloads and/or are required to finish work within limited time periods (Janssen, 2001). Under these circumstances, supervisors may experience some level of recovery by abusing subordinates, because it frees them from the resource-consuming process of suppressing aggression and provides them with a sense of control. Thus, another tactic for reducing the occurrence of abusive supervisory behavior is to attempt to change or alleviate supervisors’ perceptions of (high) job demands. For example, senior-level (i.e., skip-level) supervisors could monitor and, when necessary, take steps to manage the job demands of their subordinates (i.e., supervisors), which would lessen the likelihood that frontline subordinates become victims of supervisors’ stress releasing. Ways of reducing supervisors’ perceived job demands might include actually reducing their workload, providing them with more resources, and coaching them to work more efficiently.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Drawing upon conservation of resources theory, we conducted three studies with multiple methods to examine the actor-centric beneficial effects of abusive supervisory behavior on supervisors themselves, and whether this effect was contingent upon both individual and contextual factors. By investigating how supervisors build and save resources from conducting abusive supervisory behavior, we touch upon the issue that abusive behavior can be beneficial for supervisors, at least in the short term. Although the current research has a variety of strengths (e.g., a mix of lab and field studies, temporal separation of focal variables, etc.), some limitations and directions for future research are worth noting.

First, because the current research focuses on actor-centric effects of abusive supervisory behavior,
we collected supervisor-reports of daily abusive supervisory behavior, recovery, and engagement in Study 2. Doing this, however, may give rise to problems of common method variance (CMV; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). We therefore followed Koopman et al.’s (2016) suggestions for minimizing CMV effects in daily research. First, we collected data at two time points per day, which allowed us to examine the effects of morning variables on afternoon variables. Such temporal separation is also one of the most effective remedies for limiting CMV (Johnson, Rosen, & Djurdjevic, 2011). In addition, we explored our data by using the measure of outcome (i.e., work engagement) on the following day and found comparable results. Second, we controlled for morning assessments of recovery level, so as to predict change in recovery level as a function of abusive supervisory behavior. Third, when conducting the analyses, we mean-centered all daily variables at the individual level, which effectively removes between-person confounds such as response tendencies and stable traits. More importantly, our two experiments help to establish the causality and reduce the concern of CMV.

Second, researchers might consider examining the actor-based consequences of abusive supervision on a wider spectrum of outcomes. Based on conservation of resources theory, we identified recovery level as one beneficial proximal outcome of abusive supervisory behavior for actors, yet other outcomes are likely as well. For example, exhibiting abusive behavior may increase supervisors’ negative affect via upward emotion contagion from subordinates’ negative reactions to such behavior (Ashkanasy, Bennett, & Martinik, 2016; Tee, Paulsen, & Ashkanasy, 2013). Prior research found that abusive supervision triggers negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and fear in subordinates (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007), which can then be “caught” by supervisors (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994) because subordinates and supervisors have frequent interactions (Ilies, Wagner, & Morgeson, 2007; Qin, Huang, Hu, Schminke, & Ju, 2018).

Third, for theoretical reasons, we examined the moderating effects of empathic concern and job demands, capturing the influences of supervisors’ individual differences and job factors, respectively, on the relationship of abusive supervisory behavior with its consequences. In addition to these two factors, future research could take into account organizational contexts and subordinate factors. For example, subordinates’ status within the team may influence how supervisors are affected by their own abusive behaviors, such that supervisors may be more likely to have increased recovery when they abuse a subordinate with low status because low status individuals are devalued and marginalized in the team and it is easier for supervisors to justify their mistreatments toward these employees (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Luan, Hu, & Xie, 2017).

Fourth, we explored the consequences of abusive supervisory behavior within the same day, thus what we captured were proximal or immediate benefits for supervisors. Indeed, in the long run, as our supplementary analyses suggested, other consequences may emerge for supervisors. For example, their relationships with abused subordinates will deteriorate (e.g., distrust will increase) and they may even experience retaliation from subordinates (Lian et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2010). In this sense, supervisors who frequently demonstrate abusive supervisory behavior may experience higher stress levels due to social sanctions from subordinates. Hence, they may experience higher burnout, and their productivity and even promotion potential might be harmed in the long run. Future longitudinal studies with differing time frames are needed to explore these possible negative consequences that abusive supervisory behavior may have for supervisors.

Finally, our set of studies comprised samples collected from China (i.e., Studies 1a and 2) and the United States (i.e., Study 1b). In addition, in our daily field study, we controlled for supervisors’ power distance orientation to minimize the possibility that our findings are contingent on cultural context. Our supplementary analyses showed that supervisor power distance orientation did not moderate the relationship of abusive supervisory behavior with recovery level, nor did controlling for power distance orientation alter our results (detailed results are available from the authors upon request). Therefore, cultural differences do not appear to be an issue in our research. Nevertheless, we think it is still an intriguing direction to explore possible cultural contingencies of the effects of abusive supervision. For example, in the long term, the possible negative consequences of abusive supervision for supervisors themselves may be stronger in Western culture than in Eastern culture because, in the latter, unequal power distribution is more legitimate (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, supervisors may experience less retaliation from their subordinates after engaging in abusive supervisory behavior. We believe that considering the role of culture when investigating the consequences of abusive supervisory behavior on actors is a fruitful direction for future research.
CONCLUSION

This research represents an initial attempt to explore the impacts of abusive supervisory behavior on supervisors as opposed to subordinates. In particular, we highlight potential proximal benefits of such behavior for supervisors, which include recovery and work engagement. These beneficial effects were furthermore buffered and enhanced by empathic concern and job demands, respectively. This knowledge about the short-term benefits of abusive supervisory behavior for actors can be leveraged to effectively reduce abusive supervision through interventions that target supervisors’ resource recovery, empathic concern, and perceived job demands. We hope that our study fuels scholars’ interest to further explore how various supervisory behaviors (including abusive supervision) affect supervisors who exhibit them.

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