

BARRIERS TO ESCAPING ABUSIVE SUPERVISION

**A Systemic Perspective to Abusive Supervision: Societal and Organizational Barriers
that Prevent Victims to Escape**

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Abstract

Over the years, empirical research has documented abusive supervision's severe costs on employees' well-being and organizational functioning. Alarming, abusive supervision contributes approximately \$23.8 billion-dollar annual loss to U.S companies only. Yet, despite the growing interest in the phenomenon, research on the sustained nature of abuse is in its infant stages. The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision by Breevaart et al. (2021) is one of the first theoretical frameworks identifying external and internal barriers that prevent subordinates from escaping. Drawing upon Breevaart et al.'s (2021) work, this study examines whether victims' power distance orientation, continuance commitment and coworker support affected how long they stayed with the abusive supervisor. Using a self-report questionnaire, data were collected from a total of $N = 114$ participants. Results suggested that respondents (a) high on continuance commitment and (b) older participants stayed significantly longer in the abusive relationship. However, contrary to the expectations, high power distance orientation and coworker support were not associated with longer relationship duration. Finally, the study's limitations, practical implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: abusive supervision, abusive leadership, victims of abusive supervision, power distance, continuance commitment, co-worker support

A Systemic Perspective to Abusive Supervision: Identifying Societal and Organizational Barriers that Prevent Victims to Escape

The notion of "supervision" was initially introduced in the literature in 1930, generally defined as a concept aiming to improve workers' efficiency under a commander's supervision (Khan, 2015). In today's organizations, supervisors can be an essential source of support to employees; however, many workers remain mistreated. Workplace mistreatment takes many forms, i.e. bullying, sexual harassment, gender and racial discrimination, public humiliation, exclusion from work-related activities etc. (Lim & Cortina, 2005). Over the years, negative aspects of supervision started to emerge, shaped by several dreadful historical events and supervisory styles. A recent and well-known example of terrific management is France Telecom in 2019, the French multinational telecommunications corporation that headlined top newspapers in the world. In total, 69 employees took their own life within three years as a result of workplace bullying that was cultivated by hostile culture, management strategies and a toxic work environment. Chrisafis (2019) writes for The Guardian that employees reported consistent psychological abuse from bosses – calling it “management by terror”, and how the company had made their lives "unbearable". The employee suicide crisis at France Telecom indeed revealed the profound consequences of cruel management. Waters (2017) argues that such disturbing events often remain hidden from the public eye because of the “collective denial” that prevails in our society – which in turn reinforces the cycle of unspoken pain from employees, anxiety and suffering.

A commonly studied type of workplace mistreatment is abusive supervision, representing a serious growing problem in companies and a vibrant research field in organizational science. Tepper (2000, p. 178) defines abusive supervision as “*subordinates' perception of the extent to which the supervisor engages in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact*”. Some manifestations of abusive supervisory behaviours include speaking rudely to subordinates to elicit high performance, lying, willful hostility, yelling, screaming, ridiculing, or even non-verbal behaviours such as withholding important information and manipulation (Keashly, 1998; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000).

Abusive supervisory behaviours have been directly linked to detrimental outcomes, particularly with respect to severe costs for both employees and organizational functioning (Fischer et al., 2021; Khan, 2015; Pauksztat et al., 2022; Rousseau & Aubè, 2018; Tepper, 2000; Zhang & Liao, 2015). Research documents several victim outcomes of abuse, such as

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increased turnover rates, workplace deviance, job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, lower job performance, reduced self-efficacy, and impaired psychological well-being (Herscovis et al., 2010; Hussain et al., 2020; Katana et al., 2019; Tepper, 2000; Wheeler et al., 2013; Yagil et al., 2011). The negative impact of abusive supervision can even spill over to personal aspects of an employee's life (Hoobler et al., 2006; Martinko et al., 2013). Alarmingly, Tepper et al. (2006) note that abusive supervision contributes to an estimated \$23.8 billion-dollar annual loss in U.S. corporations only, affecting more than 13% of U.S. employees (Tepper, 2007). Abusive supervision is not a low-base rate phenomenon – a Norwegian study by Aasland et al. (2009) found that about a third of employees frequently reported some form of destructive supervision within six months of questioning. As cited in Yamada (2008), a national survey conducted by Zogby International and the Workplace Bullying Institute reports that abusive supervisors are responsible for 72% of reported workplace abuse in the U.S.

Despite the growing interest directed to antecedents and consequences of abusive supervision, one perspective that calls for closer examination is the enduring feature of abuse. Given the prevalence of abusive supervision and its significant consequences (Grandey et al., 2007; Hobman et al., 2009; Tepper, 2007; Tepper et al., 2009), it is critical to explore and understand the barriers that prevent victims from leaving. Although Tepper's (2000) definition clearly emphasizes the sustained nature of the phenomenon, the number of studies capturing this aspect is scarce (Fischer et al., 2021). The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision introduced by Breevaart et al. (2021) is the first theoretical framework examining the prolonged nature of abuse, specifically by creating an onion-shaped model of hierarchically organized barriers. The authors accommodate the original model on domestic abuse (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997) to the workplace context and essentially identify higher-level barriers that fall outside the employee–supervisor dynamics, i.e., societal and organizational factors.

Based on the Breevaart et al.'s (2021) Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision – the current study seeks empirically test barriers that prevent victims from leaving the abusive relationship; two of which stand at the larger societal level, namely (1) power distance and (2) continuance commitment, as well as one barrier at the organizational level (3) social support at work.

This thesis will offer several contributions to the current status of research on abusive supervision. To our knowledge, the present empirical study is the first to investigate barriers on a larger societal and organizational level with respect to the duration of the abuse

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as an outcome variable. The aim is to initially advance the understanding of the conditions under which abusive supervision manifests in a sustained nature and recognize the systemic forces that prevent victims from leaving. Despite the plethora of scientific research on abusive supervision, limited studies have considered group or external influences (e.g. cultural values) as potential barriers to leaving (Aryee et al., 2008; Lin et al., 2013).

Essentially, seeking to understand and expand the range of the barriers that are inherent to the victim's decision to end the abuse is fundamental. Only then can we adopt changes in policy that allow effective intervention in institutions and companies, as well as create strategies that promote victims' help-seeking behaviours.

The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision

Breevaart et al.'s (2021) Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision builds on a theoretical framework that explicitly focuses on the sustained nature of the abusive relationship. The framework resembles an onion-shaped model, where the victim is put in the centre of the onion. Barriers are placed in four clusters, referred to as "layers". The outer layers represent more distal barriers; Layer (1): barriers in the larger societal context and Layer (2): barriers in the organizational context, while the inner layers capture Layer (3): barriers due to the abusive supervisor and Layer (4): barriers within the abused subordinate. Essentially, adopting a systemic perspective allows for a more informed picture of prevention strategies through the involvement of broader actors, such as institutions, practitioners and HR professionals.

Abusive Supervision and Power Distance

Previous research has shown that cultural values play an important role in individuals' assessment, perceptions, reaction to facets of work and, ultimately, decision making (Gelfand et al., 2007; Lee & Antonakis, 2014; Wei et al., 2017). Culture also determines a norm for what is considered acceptable or appropriate (Hofstede et al., 2006) and what individuals expect from leaders (Ensari & Murphy, 2003; Gelfand et al., 2007). An important cultural dimension that may affect followers' decision to stay with an abusive supervisor is followers' power distance orientation (Breevaart et al., 2021), defined by Hofstede (1980) as the extent employees perceive the power in an organization, institution, or society as unequally distributed. Farh et al. (2007) argue that employees in high power distance cultures interpret abusive supervision as a normalized societal phenomenon, as they believe power resides implicitly in the supervisor's dependence. Consequently, followers with such cultural orientation are more likely to see abusive supervision as appropriate and comply with this behaviour (Wei et al., 2017).

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The present thesis chooses power distance orientation as a barrier because as Lin et al. (2013) and Kirkman et al. (2007) point out three important arguments; (1) power distance is one of the most relevant cultural values one can hold, (2) it is highly prevalent in cultural frameworks and (3) since abusive supervision is a resemblance of misusing power/authority, it is important to understand how employees interpret and respond to such actions. Furthermore, because of globalization, today's companies increasingly manage employees with diverse values, and it seems more plausible to measure power distance on an individual level construct (Kirkman et al., 2006). Furthermore, recent research has found that individual variation in cultural values is greater than inter-country variation (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Rockstuhl et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2017). The present study will therefore adapt the individual-level analysis.

Subordinates with a high-power distance orientation believe that managers are superior; their decisions and exerting power should be accepted (Javidan et al., 2006). There is commonly an unquestioning attitude and a will to comply with supervisory behaviours (Lin et al., 2013; Rauniyar et al., 2017), often due to the enhanced perceived ability and competency that characterizes supervisors (Hwang & Francesco, 2010). More importantly, Morrison and Rothman (2009, p. 126;) argue that these individuals will likely suppress their opinions and restrict speaking up to their managers because they believe it makes no impact. Adding to this idea, in rigid hierarchies that deploy large communication gaps, senior management is so disconnected from the lower-level employees that abusive supervision could often go unnoticed (Mintzberg, 1993). In this study, it seems plausible that individuals high on power distance orientation are more likely to remain silent and endure abusive supervision rather than escaping it sooner.

On the contrary, individuals with low PDO do not readily accept status differences and generally form a close relationship with their supervisor (Tyler et al., 2000). Such employees are more likely to react to unjust treatment and abusive supervision, often resisting decisions that are taken without their participation (Khatri, 2009). Individuals low on power distance orientation do not see a discrepancy in status and feel more comfortable with responding to abuse (Lin et al., 2013). Lam and Xu (2017) studied the interaction of abusive supervision and employee PDO on employee silence. They found that the relationship between abusive supervision and employee silence is significantly more salient in high PDO individuals.

Another mechanism through which power distance orientation might operate is inspired by cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which postulates that the

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values we hold can largely influence how we process and understand social information, consequently shaping behavioural outcomes. According to this theory, values such as power distance orientation likely determine an employee's response to abusive supervision, meaning that high PDO individuals are less affected by abuse because they perceive it as less stressful. On the other hand, subordinates with low power distance orientation make it more personal and evaluate it as more stressful, which could lead to ending the abusive relationship sooner.

Based on all these findings, we advance to the following hypothesis:

H1: Power distance orientation is positively related to relationship duration.

The role of Continuance Commitment

Continuance commitment is defined as an employee's perception of costs if they leave the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). The multidimensional nature of continuance commitment refers to either the employee's willingness to remain within the company as a result of available benefits (e.g., salary package, bonuses, pension scheme etc.) or the inability to leave due to a perceived lack of other employment opportunities. Importantly, it takes many forms: monetary, professional (i.e. giving up an important position) or even social (interpersonal relationships at the workplace) (Taing et al., 2011). The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision (Breevaart et al., 2021) places it in a larger social context, as this barrier not only depends on the employee's workplace but largely on the job market, low employability conditions and the state of the economy as a whole. Due to the intensifying labour market competition, rapid economic changes (e.g. COVID), low job mobility, company restructuring, rapidly advancing technology etc., today's employees are not guaranteed job security, which leads to tolerating various workplace situations (Mao et al., 2019). Similarly, the phenomenon of continuance commitment has been documented as a barrier to help-seeking in cases of domestic abuse, commonly manifested as financial insecurity or dependence on the partner (Adib et al., 2019; Caridade et al., 2021; Fugate et al., 2005; Lysova et al., 2022)

On the other hand, abusive supervisory behaviours are likely to be less impactful for employees with more attractive employment opportunities; in addition, they are drawn to end the abusive relationship without a perceived loss of benefits (Tepper, 2000). These results corroborate the ones from Wei and Si (2013), suggesting that abusive supervision has less influence on employees that report high perceived mobility (perception of available alternative job opportunities) (Wheeler et al., 2005), and they are more likely to leave the organization sooner.

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Relevant to the concept of continuance commitment is the term "reluctant stayers", which signifies an important avenue of research in turnover literature (Hom et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2019). Hom et al. (2012) popular theoretical framework conceptualizes reluctant stayers as frustrated employees who want to leave their current companies but are unable to do so. The authors argue that this behaviour is shaped by external labour market forces, i.e. limited to no job alternatives and the reluctance to risk the accumulated investments (pension, bonuses etc.). However, one of the very few studies exploring reluctant stayers' behavioural tendencies is Sing (2020), who collected data in Taiwan from 228 employees in the banking sector. This study examined the response of reluctant stayers to abusive supervision, specifically looking into turnover intentions. Findings suggest that the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intentions is significantly stronger when perceived job alternatives are low than higher. Similarly, Saleem et al. (2018) found that among police personnel in Pakistan, the impact of abusive supervision on turnover intentions is weaker when continuance commitment is high.

Applying these findings to our hypothesized model, we assume that employees with high continuance commitment who lack alternative employment opportunities or cannot afford to lose the benefits of their current position are more likely to remain in the abusive relationship longer. On the other hand, the decision to leave sooner would be easier for employees with low continuance commitment because they perceive their exit to not be personally costly. As such, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Continuance commitment is positively related to relationship duration.

Barriers due to Co-Worker Social Support

The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision by Breevaart et al. (2021) proposes social support from coworkers as a barrier to leaving the abusive relationship. Co-worker relationships have important implications for work-related outcomes. One of the mechanisms the authors' highlight is the cross-domain buffering hypothesis (Duffy et al., 2002), which predicts that supportive interactions from one domain (co-workers) may buffer negative effects from another domain (abusive supervision). Sharing negative experiences with coworkers may foster closer ties between employees, thus, making it more difficult to leave the organization in case of abusive supervision (Bosson et al., 2006). Career researchers have identified powerful impacts that coworker support has on employees, suggesting that positive coworker relations increase employee's intent to stay in the organization, above and beyond other factors (e.g. job satisfaction, leadership, salary etc.) (Basford & Offermann, 2012; Kim

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et al., 2017). Supportive colleagues are also found to alleviate employees' emotional strain from stressors (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016; Wu & Hu, 2009). From the conservation of resources (COR) theory, receiving social resources such as coworker support in the form of emotional assistance, care and protection might compensate for the loss of resources (e.g. abusive supervision) (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Colleagues may be an important support to victims of an abusive supervisor, perhaps even alleviating its negative impact. Moreover, because of mutual sharing of experiences and distress, employees can form meaningful interpersonal relations, even friendships they cannot leave behind.

For all these reasons, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: Co-worker social support is positively related to relationship duration.

Method

Participants

The population of this research includes working individuals who are former victims of abusive supervision. The main inclusion criteria were that the respondent is 18+ years old, has been a victim of abusive supervision in the past, and no longer is. There were no additional requirements to participate. In total, the initial sampling frame comprised of $N = 149$ participants who completed the survey. All respondents who did not complete the questionnaire sufficiently and those who were ongoing victims of abusive supervision ($n = 2$) were excluded from the dataset. The final sample of analysis was $N = 114$.

The majority of the participants were female (65.8%), and the rest of the sample consisted of males (30.7%). Two participants (1.8%) did not indicate their gender. Average age of the respondents is 40 ($SD = 13.85$; $min = 19$; $max = 76$); 1.8 % ($n = 2$) of the participants did not disclose their age. The majority of the sample classified themselves as being of Dutch nationality (29 %), followed by Greek (15 %), New Zealand (13.1%), British (6.1%), American (4.4 %), German (3%), Surinamese (1.7%), Venezuelan (1.7%), Australian (1.7%) etc. In addition, there were small percentages of 20 other nationalities reported. The sample is comprised of participants coming from diverse industry sectors, mainly Teacher training and education (23.5%), Accountancy, Banking and Finance (9.6%), Healthcare (6.1%) and many more. As well, 88.7% of the participants hold a degree beyond high school. Lastly, the majority of the sample reported to be married (38.6%), living with a partner (16.7%), divorced/separated (12.3%), and never been married (30.7%).

Procedure

This research was conducted with the approval of the ethical committee of the Department of Psychology, Education and Child Studies. Data was collected through a self-report survey created in Qualtrics and was a collaborative process between bachelor's and master's students. The link to the survey was shared on various social networks (i.e. LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram), forums such as Quora, and with the researcher's personal circle (i.e. family, friends and colleagues). The questionnaire was a composite of several instruments which took no more than 20 minutes of time investment, available both in English and Dutch. There was no supervision taken over participants, no time limit, and no provision of feedback.

At the beginning of the study, the participant had to read general information on the research objective. It was emphasized that all information provided is processed anonymously, and the research was ethically approved. Participation was completely voluntary, and each participant was reserved the right to withdraw from the study at any time. There was no reward or compensation given upon completion of the survey. Furthermore, the participant was asked not to disclose the identity of the abusive supervisor. Because the nature of this topic might provoke emotional distress, we suggested contacting the General Practitioner (GP) or the research team if needed. Next, every respondent was required to provide informed consent. Before moving to the questions, a definition of abusive supervision was presented, and in case they did not identify with the situation, the survey was immediately terminated. In addition to the instruments used (see below), respondents were given the opportunity to say something to the current victims of abusive supervision and share any additional information regarding their experience. Upon completion, participants were debriefed about the Barriers model of Abusive Supervision by Breevaart et al. (2021) and essentially some recommendations on how to break these barriers.

Measures

Abusive Supervision. The phenomenon of abusive supervision was assessed through a perceptual construct, referred to as the self-labelling method developed by Einarsen and Skogstad (1996). This technique is originally considered a common approach to measuring workplace bullying and is usually presented as a single-item question or a theoretical definition. In the context of our study, self-labelling assessed the individual's perception of being abused by their supervisor. All participants were initially asked to indicate whether they have been a victim of abusive supervision by reading the definition below:

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“In the current study, we define abusive supervision as continuous verbal and non-verbal aggressive behaviour by your leader towards you, except for physical violence. We are specifically talking about a hierarchical leader-employee relationship. That means that aggressive behaviour by a colleague is not considered destructive leadership. Examples of aggressive leadership behaviour are isolating employees, blaming them for things they did not do, invading their privacy, and making fun of them in front of others.”

Based on participants' judgement, if this definition characterized their experience with the abusive supervisor, they were eligible to take part in the study and proceed to the remaining questions. Otherwise, the survey was ended immediately. The answer was given by indicating “Yes” or “No”. Respondents also completed a 15 – item scale from Tepper's (2000) measure of abusive supervision, which assesses the frequency of certain behaviours performed by the abusive supervisor. Examples of items include "(S)he made negatives comments about me to others.", "told me my thoughts or feelings are stupid", and, "told me I was incompetent." Responses were given using a five-Likert type scale; (1) = "Never" and (5) = "Always". The 15-item scale showed an overall Cronbach's alpha of (.84. In order to gain additional insights, one part of the survey included written text answers. Participants were asked to recall the experience with their abuser and give a brief description of the situation; provide the reason for ending the abusive relationship and indicate what kind of support helped and what was absent. The exact format of the questions can be found in Appendix A.

Power Distance Orientation. Power distance orientation was assessed with a 6 - item scale developed by Dorfman and Howell (1988), and Robertson and Hoffman (1999). The scale aimed to measure individuals' extent to which they accept and are acutely aware of the status difference between supervisors and employees. Sample statements are “managers should make most decisions without consulting subordinates” and “managers should seldom ask for the opinions of employees”. The scale had five-Likert type response options, ranging from (1) = *Strongly disagree* to (5) = *Strongly agree*. Higher scores on this scale indicate higher power distance orientation. The reliability of the scale for this sample stands at .69 (Cronbach's α).

Continuance Commitment: Participants' continuance commitment was measured using an 8–item scale developed by Allen & Meyer (1990). The original measure of Organizational Commitment includes the affective, continuance and normative commitment scales, but for the purpose of this study, only the continuance components subscale was adopted. This measure assessed the degree to which the respondent believed they had to remain within the organization at the time. Typical items were: “it was very hard for me to

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leave my organization, even if I wanted to” and “too much in my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization at that time.”. The items were rated on a five-point scale, ranging from (1) = *Strongly disagree* to (5) = *Strongly agree*. High scores on this measure indicate an individual's high continuance commitment. In total, two items were reversed, namely, items 1 and 4. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient measured for this sample was .81.

Co-Worker Social Support: Coworker social support was measured using the Receiving Emotional and Instrumental Support scale established by Shakespeare – Finch and Obst (2011). The scale includes 11 items in total, item 1-7 represent emotional support, while 8 - 11 capture instrumental support. The respondents were asked to indicate whether they received social support from colleagues during their time with their abusive supervisor. An example item was “there was a colleague I can talk to about the pressures in my life”, and the frequency was assessed using a 5 - point Likert scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *always*). The scale got an overall Cronbach's alpha of (.95).

Relationship Duration. To measure how long the respondent has been a victim of abusive supervision, they had to indicate at the beginning of the study: (1) year it started, (2) month it started, (3) year it ended, and (4) month it ended. The total score was calculated based on how many months each participant spent with their abusive supervisor through Transform < Date and Time Wizard.

Sociodemographic variables. The participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, nationality, level of education and marital status. Age was used as a control variable.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Prior to hypotheses testing, data-screening analysis was conducted to test relevant assumptions. An examination of Mahalanobis and Cook's distance scores revealed no extreme outliers on both relationship duration and predictor variables. However, the standardized residual statistics and scatterplots indicated three cases that did not fall within the accepted range. The three outliers proved not to be influential cases based on the analysis ran in their absence and henceforth were not removed from the dataset. As such, the assumptions of linearity, normality, independence of residuals and homoscedasticity were all deemed to be satisfied (Field, 2013). All three hypotheses were tested by performing a two-step hierarchical regression analysis, with relationship duration as an outcome variable.

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Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among research variables are presented in Table 1. Notably, there were correlations with demographic variables: power distance orientation was significantly related to participants level of education ($r = -.232$), $p = .014$. Additional analyses illustrated a decreasing order; the mean score of power distance was highest for participants with the lowest educational level i.e. high school degree ($n = 12$; $M = 2.44$), followed by bachelor/associate ($n = 55$, $M = 2.14$) and Master's degree ($n = 34$, $M = 1.98$).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis one states that power distance orientation (PDO) is positively related to relationship duration, meaning that higher scores on PDO are associated with a longer duration of the relationship. Accordingly, a two-step hierarchical regression analysis was performed with relationship duration as an outcome variable. As participants' age was significantly correlated to relationship duration, the model was controlled for age (step one), and power distance orientation was added in step two. The findings are presented in Table 2. At step one, age contributed significantly to the regression model ($F(1,111) = 7.76$, $p = .006$, accounting for 6.6% of variance in relationship duration. Results indicate that the relationship duration was longer among older participants. At step two, the addition of power distance orientation explained no additional variance to the model ($F(2,111) = 3.85$, $p = .983$). Correspondingly, individual's power distance orientation did not predict how long they had stayed with their abusive supervisor ($b = -.00$, $SE = 5.24$, $t = -.02$, $p = .983$). Therefore, H1 is rejected.

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Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	40.4	13.58	1							
2. Gender	1.72	.55	-.07							
3. Education Level	2.42	.87	.22*	.07						
4. Relationship Duration	27.39	32.79	.26**	.12	.00					
5. Abusive Supervision	3.22	.64	.08	.09	-.11	.02				
6. Power Distance	2.10	.58	-.09	-.18	-.23*	-.02	.07			
7. Co-worker Support	3.46	.97	-.12	-.05	-.04	-.02	.07	.04		
8. Continuance Commitment	3.36	.82	.13	.04	.04	.30*	.12	-.11	.06	1

Note. Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female. Education level was coded as 1 = High school, 2 = Bachelor/Associate degree, 3 = Master's degree, 4 = Doctoral degree, 5 = Professional degree

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Table 2*Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Age and Power Distance Orientation as predictors*

Variable	B	β	t	R^2	ΔR^2	p
Step 1	2.85			.07	.07	.006
Age		.26	2.79			
Step 2	3.01			.07	.00	.983
Age		.26	2.76**			
Power Distance Orientation		-.00	-.02			

Note. $N = 111$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3*Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Age and Continuance Commitment as predictors*

Variable	B	β	t	R^2	ΔR^2	p
Step 1	2.85			.07	.07	.006
Age		.26	2.79			
Step 2	- 30.27			.14	.07	.004
Age		.22	2.46**			
Continuance Commitment		.27	2.97**			

Note. $N = 111$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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Table 4*Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Age and Co-worker Support as predictors*

Variables	B	β	<i>t</i>	R^2	ΔR^2	<i>p</i>
Step 1	2.85			.07	.07	.006
Age		.26	2.79			
Step 2	2.60			.07	.00	.983
Age		.26	2.76**			
Co-worker Support		.00	.02			

Note. $N = 111$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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Hypothesis 2 states that continuance commitment is positively related to relationship duration. Results are illustrated in Table 3. The model was controlled for age (step one). Introducing continuance commitment in step 2 significantly contributes to an additional 7% amount of variance in the regression model ($F(2,111) = 8.56, p = .004$). Importantly, participants high on continuance commitment stayed significantly longer with their abusive supervisor ($b = .27, SE = 3.65, t = 2.97, p = .004$). The overall model accounted for a 13.6% variation in relationship duration, with both age and continuance commitment as significant predictors.

The third hypothesis tested whether higher levels of co-worker support imply longer relationship duration. After controlling for age, introducing coworker support in the second regression model contributed to 0% of additional variance; therefore the change in R^2 is not significant ($F(2,111) = 3.86, p = .983$). Contrary to the expectations, participants who received high co-worker support did not stay significantly longer in the abusive relationship ($b = .00, SE = 3.16, t = .02, p = .983$).

Discussion

Abusive supervision has raised increasing interest in the field of organizational science, given the significant deleterious outcomes for employees' well-being and overall organizational functioning (Tepper, 2000). Despite the considerable attention devoted to exploring antecedents and consequences of abusive supervisory behaviours, empirical research on the prolonged nature of abuse is limited. The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision introduced by Breevaart et al. (2021) is one of the few theoretical frameworks focusing on societal, organizational, and personal factors that may explain why subordinates do not end the abuse. Following Breevaart et al. (2021) work, the present research aimed to further explore the enduring aspect of the abusive relationship by testing two barriers at the larger societal level, namely (1) power distance orientation and (2) continuance commitment, as well as one barrier at the organizational level; (3) co-worker social support.

Inspired by Hofstede's (1980) study on cultural dimensions and previous research (Lam & Xu, 2017; Lin et al., 2013), power distance orientation was expected to predict how long they had stayed with their abusive supervisor. However, the findings of the present study lent no support for the assumption that individuals high on power distance orientation would stay longer with their abuser. There are several plausible explanations for this result - mainly pertaining to methodological issues measuring cultural values. From Hofstede's

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(1980) point of view, culture entails socially shared values distinctive to one society, which consequently influence and guide human behaviour. Hence, capturing the effect of cultural values such as power distance orientation on victims' behaviour would require either collecting data from homogenous samples or large-scale cultural comparison studies (Taras et al., 2009). One of the very few studies focusing on the degree to which cultural values affect employees' response to abusive supervision is the one by Lin et al. (2013). The authors provide evidence that subordinates high in power distance orientation are less affected by abusive supervision compared to low PDO. Note that this study was conducted in China, which is generally listed as a country in the higher rankings of power distance (Hofstede, 1980). On the contrary, our study collected data not limited to a particular culture. We should notice that the mean level of power distance orientation was generally low in the sample, which can also be attributed to sampling representativeness. Most of the respondents reported Dutch nationality, followed by Greek, New Zealand etc. High power distance cultures such as China or Malaysia adopt sharp hierarchical structures where higher management and lower-level employees accept power as existentially unequal (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018; Hofstede, 1980). On the other hand, the Netherlands is found to have one of the lowest power distance scores (38). The Dutch culture emphasizes decentralized power, trust, and close cooperation between employees and their supervisors - evident from the increasing number of flat structured companies across the country. Arguably, the predominance of Dutch respondents in the sample might account for the low level of power distance orientation, subsequently affecting the obtained results.

Another idea that remains puzzling is the changing nature of cultural values. Taras et al.'s (2009) influential article on measuring culture identifies ways cultural values can be accommodated to specific situations through globalization, migration, exposure to different cultural circumstances, and work environments. Alternatively, values like power distance orientation are not so stable and are subject to transformation in response to changing societal environments and organizational cultures. The insignificant results in the study may originate from this fluctuation in PDO, particularly considering the retrospective nature of our study. Individuals' power distance orientation could have changed from when they were with their abusive supervisor, while this change in values is not always conscious and easy to identify. Studying power distance orientation as a barrier preventing victims from leaving requires additional research on how culture constrains these individuals from escape and how to detect such effects methodologically.

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Furthermore, it was expected that individuals high on continuance commitment would be less likely to escape the abuse, leading to longer relationship duration. Previous studies on abusive supervision have exclusively focused on linkages with perceived mobility (Tepper, 2009; Wei & Si, 2013) and the moderating role of continuance commitment in turnover intentions (Saleem et al., 2018; Sing, 2020). These studies collectively maintain that victims' perceived costs and benefits influence the decision to leave or remain in the workplace. For instance, Saleem et al. (2018) found that high values of continuance commitment prevent employees from leaving the organization in case of abusive supervision. In the same vein, our results demonstrate that victims high on continuance commitment stayed significantly longer with their abusive supervisor; therefore, Hypothesis 2 was confirmed. As cited in Allen and Meyer (1996), Howard Becker's theoretical framework points out that commitment explains the consistency in an individual's behaviour, ultimately through side bets that determine their decision. Victims feel the need to remain within the organization because the opportunity to escape is limited; there is a lack of employment opportunities available, or losing current benefits (e.g. pension scheme, benefits, medical care etc.) is personally too costly (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Similarly, Tepper (2000) noted that perceived costs and benefits affect subordinates' thought processes in a way that abusive supervision is more distressing to employees who believe in having no options and alternative employment possibilities. Subsequently, victims become dependent on their current organization, which leads to a continued relationship with their abusive supervisor. On the contrary, abusive supervision might be less threatening to individuals who perceive to have readily available jobs. As a result, these subordinates are willing to escape sooner without a lot of personal sacrifices. Further, continuance commitment in the current study was also observed as a barrier through victims' comments. Individuals were asked to explain the reason why they ended the abuse, and some of the reasons noted were "resigned due to another offer", "found a better opportunity", and "worked hard to find another job". Ultimately, the need to remain with the abusive supervisor diminishes in the presence of work alternatives.

A surprising aspect of the results was that high levels of coworker support did not lead to longer relationship duration. Contrary to the expectations, the extent of coworker support received was not associated with how long the victims had stayed with their abusive supervisor. This hypothesis was derived from The Barriers model of Abusive Supervision (Breevaart et al., 2021), suggesting that sharing negative experiences (i.e. abuse) among team members creates stronger interpersonal relationships. As a result, closer ties with colleagues

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may pose a barrier to escaping the abuse and leaving the organization. The findings reject the cross-domain buffering hypothesis (Duffy et al., 2002), which predicts that supportive interactions from one domain (coworkers) buffer negative effects from another domain (abusive supervision). In addition, the results of the study do not coincide with previous findings that highlight the alleviating effect coworker support has on emotional strain (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016), as well as its powerful impact on employee's intent to stay within the company (Basford & Offermann, 2012; Kim et al., 2017). One possible interpretation of the contradictory findings is the alternative way coworker support operates. Although not significant, the findings are more consistent with the "reverse buffering" hypothesis, first noted by Beehr (1995) and documented in several empirical studies (Hwa, 2012; Liu et al., 2021; Wu & Hu, 2009). Wu and Hu's (2009) study supports the reverse buffering phenomenon, as they found that employees receiving high coworker support were more emotionally exhausted in case of abusive supervision. The authors argue that sharing negative experiences with colleagues reminds the victim of the toxic work environment, which aggravates the emotional strain induced by the abusive supervisor.

Similarly, Hwa (2012) implies that coworker support is reciprocal; the person receiving support is also expected to be supportive, which can be emotionally taxing. In the context of the present study, the presence of high coworker support may escalate the situation with the abusive supervisor via increased emotional exhaustion. Perhaps, victims feel obliged to support their colleagues, and additional stress accumulates while revisiting negative feelings. Consequently, exacerbating one's emotional strain can prompt the individual to quit the organization and end the abuse sooner.

Interestingly, the findings of the study also suggest that older participants stayed significantly longer with their abusive supervisors. Empirical research indicates that compared to young employees, older workers are more effective at regulating their negative emotions in case of abusive supervision. Specifically, Peng et al. (2020) found that older people are more likely to use cognitive reappraisal as a coping mechanism in response to abusive supervision. Furthermore, older employees have more experience dealing with various work situations and abusive supervisors (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). Perhaps, abusive supervision is less distressing to older employees who are more likely to normalize it, which leads to staying with the abuser for longer periods.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings can be attributed to some extent to the limitations imposed by the research design and measurement methods. One of the concerns of this study is the

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measurement of power distance orientation. Although data collection varies across studies, past research has mostly focused on contrasting held beliefs on a societal level, i.e. across different cultures and countries (Richard et al., 2021), given the shared aspect of cultural constructs. As such, obtaining a significant effect would require measuring power distance orientation in homogenous samples or large-scale cultural comparison studies (Taras et al., 2009). However, a common limitation predominating few major cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004; Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1992) is the relatively small number of respondents drawn from each country (Taras et al., 2009). This limitation pertains to the present study, as the number of respondents representing each country is too small, which could have generated insignificant results. Relatedly, it is still unclear whether measuring power distance on an individual level has a similar effect to country-level analysis. Further cross-cultural research is needed to clarify the appropriate measurement of cultural values as power distance orientation, especially in the context of former victims of abusive supervision.

Second, a potential limitation is using self-report data that captures participants' perceptions. Notably, self-report measurements were the most appropriate method of data collection considering the subjective assessment of abusive supervision. However, this might not always accurately represent reality, which can consequently inflate the results (Hwa, 2012). Future studies on abusive supervision can address this limitation by testing different methods, such as longitudinal designs, control studies, or shared-perception group measurements (Wu & Hu, 2009).

In addition, another concern is the retrospective nature of the study. Regarding power distance orientation, cultural values are subject to change due to changing work environments, social structures, countries, economy, technological and ideological inventions (Taras et al., 2009). In particular, the individual's power distance orientation with their abusive supervisor might not be consistent with what they value now. Furthermore, participants tend to give less accurate answers when asked to recall an event or situation that happened in the past. Fundamentally, they report feelings and beliefs more congruent with what they currently believe in (Hipp et al., 2020). Future research collecting data from former victims of abusive supervision is advised to ask more specific questions that help respondents search their memory and increase recall accuracy.

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings of this research yield important guidelines for organizations and HR professionals. First and foremost, it is fundamental that HR

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professionals recognize abusive supervisory behaviours, given the substantial evidence of their negative impact on employees' well-being and overall organizational functioning. (Tepper, 2000). The lack of HR involvement is also documented in victims' responses, as many individuals said they missed help from organizational HR professionals, which was reportedly non-existent. There are, however, several ways in which abusive supervision is appropriately prevented and remedied in the workplace.

Initially, organizations should create policies that clearly communicate to all employees that abusive supervision is unacceptable. The zero-abuse policy must be adequately conveyed during employees' onboarding days and consistently reinforced through organizational culture. With regards to reactive measures, organizations can implement frequent one-on-one sessions with HR professionals that encourage employees to report abuse. An alternative would be administering anonymous employee surveys as a safer way of enabling individuals to share their experiences. In addition, offering individual counselling to employees has shown to be an effective strategy in combating abusive supervision (Pradhan & Jena, 2018).

Since victims high on continuance commitment have been found to stay longer with their abusive supervisor, it is imperative to provide appropriate help. Simply guiding individuals high on continuance commitment to finding alternative job opportunities are not feasible due to potential high turnover rates. A better solution would be to approach this issue from a managerial perspective – HR should focus on offering effective training to supervisors that improve leadership skills and, subsequently, their relationship with subordinates (Meglich et al., 2019). Lastly, organizations can implement obligatory feedback sessions with supervisors and subordinates where the employee highlights negative aspects of their leadership. The lack of communication and proper feedback sessions may contribute to sustained abuse, as some supervisors may not perceive their behaviours as abusive (Ritzman, 2016).

Conclusion

To conclude, the present study aims to extend Breevaart et al. (2021) Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision, which explicitly focuses on the sustained nature of abuse, by identifying barriers that make it difficult for subordinates to leave. The study tests two barriers at the larger societal level, namely (1) power distance orientation and (2) continuance commitment, and one barrier at the organizational level; (3) social support from coworkers. The most striking result suggests that individuals high on continuance commitment reported longer relationship duration. Employees who believe in having no options and alternative

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employment possibilities feel obliged to remain in the organization, preventing them from ending the abuse. Likewise, older age was significantly associated with a longer period of abuse. Although more empirical research is needed on the prolonged nature of abusive supervision, continuance commitment and individuals' age present important barriers that prevent victims from escaping.

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