A Qualitative Account from Former Victims: How Abusive Supervision Begins, And Subordinates' and Bystanders' Reactions

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Abstract

Abusive supervision is a harmful phenomenon characterized by repeated verbal and non-verbal hostility from supervisors to subordinates. Extensive research has examined its causes and effects. However, one crucial question remains unanswered: How do these abusive supervisory relationships begin? This study focused on how leaders behaved during the first incident of abuse, how subordinates felt and responded to this behavior, how leaders reacted to this response, and bystander reactions. The goal was to explore various dynamics surrounding the first critical incident of abuse. This was achieved through qualitative exploration with a survey employing the critical incident technique to gain insights from 52 former victims. Inductive thematic analysis helped identify behavioral and emotional categories in line with the research questions. Results showed that leaders frequently exhibited overt hostility and manipulation, and occasionally abused their power, during the first critical incident. Victims' most frequent response was silence, accompanied by negative emotions such as fear, confusion, anger, and self-doubt. They sometimes confronted their leader, who typically reacted dismissively and mockingly. Meanwhile, bystanders were mostly passive or inactive because they were also experiencing abuse. These findings can help spread awareness and facilitate recognition of potentially abusive behaviors, as well as aid the development of formal communication channels and training programs.

A Qualitative Account from Former Victims: How Abusive Supervision Begins, And Subordinates' and Bystanders' Reactions

Abusive supervision is defined as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000). It can include passive-aggressiveness, rudeness, and withholding praise, as reported by Howington (2024). In their investigation of toxic workplaces, 87% of respondents had worked with a toxic supervisor, of which 30% experienced more than one. Outcomes such as increased anxiety, adverse physical symptoms, and reduced job-related outcomes were reported, consistent with scientific literature. Psychologically, abusive supervision is linked to increased depression, emotional exhaustion, and anxiety (Mackey et al., 2017; Martinko et al., 2013; Zhang & Liao, 2015). Abusive supervision is also related to unhealthy symptoms, such as somatic stress, and work-related outcomes, including lower job satisfaction and performance, and higher deviance and turnover intentions (Mackey et al., 2017; Martinko et al., 2013; Zhang & Liao, 2015). Additionally, co-workers who witness the abuse can experience negative emotions and react negatively toward the supervisor (Mitchell et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2022). Finally, abuse affects victims' personal lives through family undermining and work-family conflict (Martinko et al., 2013; Tepper, 2000; Zhang & Liao, 2015).

Undoubtedly, abusive supervision is harmful, with research focusing on its antecedents (Zhang & Bednall, 2016) and outcomes (Mackey et al., 2017; Zhang & Liao, 2015). Models have been proposed that depict how abusive supervision potentially emerges (e.g., Klaussner, 2013; Oh & Farh, 2017). However, empirical evidence regarding its onset is lacking, and many questions remain unanswered: How did the leader initially behave, and how did the subordinate respond? Subordinates' initial reactions may shape the relationship; did they stay silent, signaling

to the leader that the behavior was appropriate? Did they retaliate, provoking more hostility? If bystanders were present, did they support the victim or remain passive?

This study explores the onset of abusive supervision by qualitatively examining the first incident from former victims. A survey employing the critical incident technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) will gather insights on what happened, how victims felt and reacted, how the leader responded, and bystander reactions. The goal is to identify different dynamics related to initial abuse by analyzing behavioral and emotional categories through thematic analysis. This research makes several contributions. It addresses the knowledge gap regarding the onset of abusive supervision. Then, it provides nuanced insights into abusive supervisory dynamics, which are lacking due to the dominance of quantitative methodologies. The focus will be on former victims, as reflection is believed to facilitate causal attributions in qualitative recollections (Masood et al., 2024). Practically, behavioral and emotional categories can be presented as early warning signs of abuse to facilitate recognition and motivate intervention.

The Onset of Abusive Supervision

As previously introduced, abusive supervision involves different types of behaviors. Tepper's (2000) Abusive Supervision Scale measures hostile behaviors as verbal (e.g., telling subordinates they are incompetent) and non-verbal (e.g., silent treatment). Conversely, Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) developed a new scale based on Tepper's (2000) scale, classifying behaviors as active (e.g., putting subordinates down in front of others) or passive (e.g., withholding praise). Research has focused on these hostile behaviors once abuse has been established. Specifically, active behaviors have received the most attention, although passive behaviors may be more common (Baron & Neuman, 1996). This raises the question: what type of behaviors mark the beginning of abusive supervision?

Research on the onset of abusive supervision is limited, but literature on interpersonal aggression in the workplace suggests it may begin with passive and covert behaviors. Indeed, mobbing and workplace bullying are both escalating phenomena, beginning with interpersonal conflict that later escalates into more severe behavior (Einarsen et al., 2002; Leymann, 1996). Bullying starts with subtle and ambiguous behavior (e.g., indirect aggression) that later escalates into covert and harmful behaviors (e.g., direct criticism) (Krishna et al., 2023). Similarly, domestic abuse is an escalating process. Short et al. (2000) identified warning signs of partner violence, including charm, possessiveness, criticism, blaming others, and testing limits. Consistent with these findings, Daw et al. (2023) identified subtle behaviors such as controlling actions, emotional manipulation, jealousy, and love bombing in the initial stages, which subsequently escalated.

Research on hostile workplace and domestic relationships indicates that they begin with covert and subtle behaviors that later escalate. However, there is a notable gap in empirical understanding regarding abusive supervision's onset. No theories exist to explain how it begins, but based on the research above, it is likely that abusive supervision commences with covert and subtle behaviors. This gap will be examined through the study's first research question: What leader behaviors characterize the first incident of abusive supervision?

Subordinates' Reaction to the Abuse

When subordinates perceive hostility from their supervisors, they react in various ways and experience different emotions. This is partially captured in Klaussner's (2013) Dyadic Process Model. He proposes that hostility triggers feelings of injustice, which are influenced by how much the subordinate believes the leader's behavior could have, should have, and would have been different. The perceived injustice triggers responses that can aim at reconciliation

(functional response) or reciprocation (dysfunctional response), either actively (e.g., remedial voice) or passively (e.g., forgiveness). Functional responses end the abuse, while dysfunctional responses provoke adverse leader reactions, resulting in escalation. A significant limitation of this framework is its limited empirical testing and evidence.

Another framework with stronger empirical support can be considered: the Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect Model (EVLN; Hirschmann, 1970), which describes how employees react to dissatisfaction. Since abusive supervision is negatively related to job satisfaction (Zhang & Liao, 2015), the EVLN model can be applied to subordinates' responses to initial abusive supervision. The model classifies responses into four categories: Exit (withdrawal or counter-productive work behavior (CWB)), Voice (expression of complaints or concerns), Loyalty (staying with the organization, hoping that conditions will improve on their own), and Neglect (disregarding job responsibilities).

Former victims likely responded to the initial abuse with behaviors that fit the exit strategy. Abusive supervision is positively linked to turnover intentions (Zhang & Liao, 2015), identified as a coping mechanism for emotional exhaustion (Pradhan et al., 2020). Perception of contract violation also explained the link between abusive supervision and turnover intentions (Pradhan et al., 2020). This reflects the negative reciprocity principle of Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964; Greco et al., 2019), which suggests that negative behaviors elicit negative responses. Moreover, the Emotional Process Theory (EPT; Oh & Farh, 2017) proposes that hostility triggers emotions, which then lead to behaviors. Specifically, hostility can cause anger, triggering supervisor-directed aggression and CWB. This coincides with findings that abused employees engage in workplace deviance (Valle et al., 2018). It is therefore expected that former victims report turnover intentions and CWB following initial abuse.

Some former victims may have responded with neglect behaviors. Abused employees neglect their job responsibilities to conserve their remaining resources (Malik et al., 2023). This can manifest as reducing knowledge sharing (Kim et al., 2015), reflecting negative reciprocity once again (Greco et al., 2019). Such behavior resembles silence, which has been positively linked to abusive supervision, mediated by emotional exhaustion (Xu et al., 2015) and psychological distress (Park et al., 2018). EPT suggests that abuse can cause fear, leading to psychological distancing and prevention-focused efforts (upholding the status quo to avoid further hostility) (Oh & Farh, 2017). Thus, former victims are expected to report behaviors such as disregarding job responsibilities, silence, and psychological distancing.

Meanwhile, voice involves confronting or communicating with the supervisor or other workers and may emerge as an initial reaction. It can take different forms, such as prohibitive voice (complaining) and promotional voice (suggesting ideas for improvement) (Schyns et al., 2018). Evidence of voice reactions is limited; Schyns et al. (2018) found that prohibitive voice was used most often, and only with higher authorities (e.g., the supervisor's boss). EPT suggests that anger can lead to voice, aiming to expand resources to deal with the abuse (Oh & Farh, 2017). Thus, although research is limited, some former victims may report communication or confrontation with the supervisor or others, following the critical incident.

Lastly, loyalty behaviors may emerge in former victims' responses. Specifically, abusive supervision is linked to declines in loyalty, shown by decreases in supervisor commitment (Schyns et al., 2018) and organizational commitment (Mackey et al., 2017). Reports of lowered supervisor and organizational commitment may emerge in former victims' recollections.

Victims exhibit various behavioral and emotional responses to abuse, although empirical evidence reflects responses during full-blown abuse, which differs from its onset. For instance,

resource depletion may not be present, and emotions such as shock or confusion could be experienced, instead of or alongside anger and fear, leading to different behaviors. Thus, the second research question is "How did subordinates react to the first critical incident of abuse?". An accompanying sub-question is "What emotions co-occurred with these reactions?".

Leader's Reactions to Subordinate's Responses

Just as subordinates evaluate and react to their leader's behaviors, leaders do the same with subordinates' behaviors. When subordinates react negatively (e.g., exit and neglect) to hostile leader behavior, the leader may respond negatively (through retaliation or continuation of abuse), following the negative reciprocity principle (Greco et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Klaussner (2013) proposes that supervisors assess subordinates' behavior on an adequate-inadequate continuum, related to organizational goals and expectations of subordinates' conduct. "Inadequate" behaviors lead to corrective or punitive actions to encourage more "adequate" behaviors. Farmanara's (2021) case study supports this proposition; managers believed that harsh tactics (intimidation, humiliation, performance pressure) were effective in improving performance and achieving organizational goals. Thus, negative leader reactions, such as retaliation and harsh tactics, are expected.

Conversely, neutral and constructive subordinate responses (e.g., loyalty and voice) can elicit various leader reactions. Loyalty may result in the continuation or escalation of abuse, as the leader receives no indication that the behavior is unacceptable. Meanwhile, negative feedback (voice) can cause adverse leader reactions. Indeed, managers low on managerial self-efficacy experience ego-threats upon receiving negative feedback (Fast et al., 2014). This triggers defensiveness, including belittling those speaking up. Moreover, emotionally unstable and powerful leaders experience stronger negative emotions in response to negative feedback,

which may lead to harmful behaviors (Niemann et al., 2014). However, voice can prompt positive reactions. Liao et al. (2018) showed that leaders behaved constructively once they recognized they had behaved abusively. Meanwhile, Shi et al. (2023) found that leaders who were made aware of their hostility employed management tactics, specifically apologies, to mitigate the damage. Thus, voicing complaints can trigger further abuse or reparative behaviors.

Overall, leader reactions can be both negative (e.g., retaliation, harsh tactics, belittlement) and positive (e.g., reparative behaviors, apologies). Evidence for these reactions comes from research investigating established abuse. However, leaders' reactions at the onset, specifically in response to the subordinates' first reaction, may differ. Thus, the third research question of this study is "What were the leader's behavioral reactions to the subordinates' response?".

Bystander Reactions to Witnessing Abusive Supervision

When abuse occurs overtly, others may witness it, known as peer abusive supervision. These witnesses or bystanders can include co-workers who are also experiencing abuse (Peng et al., 2014) or people who are not being abused (Mitchell et al., 2015). Regardless of whether they are also victims, peer abusive supervision impacts third parties' emotions and behaviors.

According to Deontic Justice Theory (Cropanzano et al., 2003), individuals have a moral obligation to act and treat others fairly, which is violated when witnessing unfair practices (e.g., abusive supervision). This generally leads to negative emotions and subsequent action tendencies. Priesemuth and Schimke (2019) showed that witnessing peer abuse led to anger, triggering coworker protective behaviors (defending or siding with the victim). Mitchell et al. (2015) found that this relationship was influenced by exclusion beliefs (e.g., the extent to which witnesses believe the victim deserves mistreatment). When witnesses believed the victim

deserved mistreatment, they felt contentment, leading to coworker exclusion behaviors (distancing from and excluding the victim). Meanwhile, low exclusion beliefs caused anger, leading to victim support and supervisor-directed deviance (Mitchell et al., 2015). Furthermore, Yu et al. (2022) qualitatively identified bystanders' reactions to witnessing abuse, including supporting the victim, avoiding the abusive supervisor, gossiping with colleagues, self-protection, and learning.

Affective Events Theory (AET; Weis & Cropanzano, 1966) also explains bystander reactions to peer abusive supervision. AET posits that work events, such as peer abusive supervision, are appraised and evaluated by the individual. These appraisals result in emotions that subsequently trigger behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1966). Wei et al. (2023) found that peer abusive supervision led to feelings of empathy for the victim and hostility towards the supervisor. These then lead to bystander organizational citizenship behavior and workplace negative gossip, respectively. Moreover, Huang et al. (2019) showed that peer abusive supervision was positively related to coworker silence, mediated by coworker workplace anxiety.

In sum, bystanders can react positively (e.g., support, defending the victim) or negatively (e.g., distancing from or excluding the victim) to peer abusive supervision. These reactions were observed over time, when third parties witnessed abuse multiple times. This study focuses on how third parties reacted to their coworkers' initial abuse. Thus, the fourth and final research question is "How did bystanders react to the first critical incident of abuse?".

Method

Participants

The target sample size was 100 to reach data saturation, the point at which additional information does not provide new insights (Butterfield et al., 2005). However, many participants opened the survey without completing it, while others reported not being former victims. In the end, 163 responses were recorded, with 59 being complete and valid (36%), 80 incomplete (49%), and 24 were not former victims (15%). Seven participants were excluded from the analysis because they provided vague answers. The final sample size was 52. The mean age was 40.06 years (SD = 14.04), ranging from 19 to 79. The sample included 43% men (M_{age} = 41.45, SD_{age} = 14.18), 55% women (M_{age} = 38.96, SD_{age} = 14.09), and 2% who preferred not to say. Regarding education, 16% held a high school diploma, 37% had a bachelor's or associate degree, 41% possessed a master's degree, 4% held a doctoral degree, and 2% had a professional degree. Concerning marital status, 47% of participants were married, 20% were living with a partner, 2% were widowed, 6% were divorced or separated, and 25% had never been married. The sector distribution is shown in Table 1, and the nationality distribution is in Table 2.

Table 1

Participant Distribution by Industry Sector

Sector	*n*	*%*
Accountancy, banking, and finance	3	5.7
Business, consulting, and management	2	3.9
Creative arts and design	1	1.9
Energy and utilities	1	1.9
Engineering and manufacturing	2	3.9
Healthcare	3	5.7
Hospitality and events management	3	5.7
Information technology	3	5.7
Law	2	3.9
Property and construction	1	1.9
Recruitment and HR	1	1.9
Retail	6	11.5
Science and pharmaceuticals	6	11.5
Social care	2	3.9

Sector	*n*	*%*
Teacher training and education	2	3.9
Transport and logistics	4	7.7
Other	8	15.4
Missing	2	3.9
Total	52	100

Table 2

Participant Distribution by Self-Reported Nationality

Nationality	*n*	% [a]
Australia	3	5.8
Belgium	2	3.9
Denmark	1	1.9
Fiji	2	3.9
Finland	1	1.9
France	1	1.9
Germany	1	1.9
Greece	8	15.4
India	3	5.8
Indonesia	2	2.9
Italy	1	1.9
Japan	2	3.9
Lithuania	1	1.9
Morocco	1	1.9
Netherlands	15	28.8
Poland	1	1.9
Romania	1	1.9
South Africa	1	1.9
Sweden	2	2.9

Nationality	*n*	% [a]
United Kingdom	4	7.7
Not applicable [b]	5	9.6
Total	58	102.9

Note. When multiple nationalities were reported, each nationality was counted once. This resulted in a higher total count than the number of participants and a total percentage higher than 100.

[a] Percentages were calculated using n=52 (sample size)

[b] "Not applicable" refers to answers that were missing or not relevant to nationality.

Procedure and Materials

Convenience and snowball sampling were used for recruitment. The survey was distributed through personal and professional networks as well as the networks of close friends, family, and professional contacts. Upon receiving the link, participants were directed to the Qualtrics questionnaire. They first received information regarding the study's topic, aim, and the data to be collected. After giving consent, information regarding destructive leadership was displayed, followed by the self-labelling question. Participants had to be at least 18 years old and be former victims of abusive supervision at work or in an educational setting (PhD students). If participants did not self-identify as a former victim of destructive leadership, they were directed to the end of the survey.

Next, participants were presented with questions regarding the duration of the abusive supervisory relationship, where they worked at the time, their relationship with the leader (e.g., direct subordinate or more distant subordinate), and how the leader generally behaved.

Participants then completed Tepper's (2000) Abusive Supervision Scale, which was included to measure the average incidence of abusive supervision and ensure that participants self-identified correctly. It is presented in Appendix A. This scale included 15 statements about hostile behaviors, and participants rated how often they encountered these behaviors on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). An example item is "(S)he ridiculed me". An additional 16th item, labeled "Other, namely:" allowed participants to report any hostile behaviors they encountered that were not included in Tepper's scale. The reliability of this scale was $\alpha = .77$.

Following this, seven open-ended questions were presented to the participants. The open-ended questions were formulated to help participants recall the first critical incident, where the "purpose or intent" seemed "fairly clear" and its "consequences are sufficiently definite," following Flanagan's (1954) definition of a critical incident. The following questions were used in the analysis:

1. Can you describe the specific incident where your leader first behaved destructively toward you? What happened?
2. What did your leader do? Why do you think your leader behaved this way? What was the context in which the behavior happened?
3. How did you respond to this first incident, and what was the outcome of this response?
4. How did you feel when this first happened? What emotion(s) did you experience?
5. Was someone else involved? If yes, who else was involved, how did they respond, and what was the outcome of their response?

After the CIT questions, participants completed demographic questions (All questions are shown in Appendix A). The answers of participants who refused to grant citing permission were excluded from the analysis report; if necessary, their answers were rephrased. Some participants

voluntarily provided the names of the companies where they experienced abusive supervision; these names were removed from the cleaned dataset to maintain confidentiality.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis, known for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was used for analysis. First, I familiarized myself with the data through careful review, noting initial ideas and patterns. Then, using Atlas.ti, I went through the data and began assigning codes when a description reflected a single and meaningful behavior or emotion. This was done without pre-made codes or frameworks, reflecting an inductive approach. Next, codes that shared similarities were grouped into categories called themes. They were then revised to ensure they formed a coherent picture. Once confirmed, they were named and defined, as presented in tables throughout the results section.

Results

The Nature of The First Critical Incident

The first research question was "What leader behaviors characterize the first incident of abusive supervision?". Participants described what happened and how their destructive leader behaved during the first incident. Initial coding identified 34 behaviors, which were grouped into broader codes. Three overarching themes emerged: "Interpersonal Hostility", "Distortion of Reality", and "Dysfunctional Leadership". An overview of themes and key behaviors is shown in Table 3.

Interpersonal Hostility

"Interpersonal Hostility" was the dominating behavioral pattern identified, occurring in 60% of critical incidents. This theme encompasses aggressive behaviors directly targeted at the

subordinate, typically to undermine their self-confidence and sense of belonging. It had two subthemes: “Belittlement and Undermining” and “Discrimination”.

Belittlement and Undermining. Leaders criticized and diminished subordinates’ self-confidence and competence in various ways. Generally, they used **accusations of incompetence.** One participant recalled: “He accused me…of incompetence, failure to achieve results, inability to guide people on my team”. Another noted: “He pressurized me intensely, said I was incompetent, and micromanaged”. In this example, the destructive leader further underlined the subordinate’s incompetence through micromanagement: “Literally sitting next to me and telling me minute by minute what to do, questioning my every move, and saying it was inefficient”. Undermining was also achieved through **questioning character and integrity**. One participant reported that, during a work meeting, the destructive leader “would often interrupt and question validity and make some belittling comment about whether it was true”. Related to accusations of incompetence, destructive leaders used **demeaning feedback** to convey dissatisfaction, which involved harsh and degrading language and behaviors. One participant explained: “She was very aggressive to me. Told me I was not doing enough, that I needed to step it up. That, if I wanted to prove that I was deserving of the position, I would have to work harder”. Two others recalled their work being fully diminished by their leaders, who compared it to “rubbish” and “vomit”.

Participants who were new to their roles suffered hostility targeted at their **inexperience.** One participant perceived this hostility during her first class with the leader. She asked for help and the leader responded in a hostile manner: “He came and did the “tsk” sound and told the whole class to “study your camera before getting to class””. Another respondent recalled: “It was my first day (and first job), and she just assumed I knew how to do everything I had to do, so I didn’t get any instructions. Then, when I forgot to do something I didn’t even know I had to do,

she yelled at me and acted like I was dumb". **Mockery** was also reported, including the use of irony. This was described by a participant whose leader introduced them as the "new superstar who can do everything", which was done "completely ironically", followed by sarcastic comments about their professional background. Another respondent faced more direct mockery: "She laughed in my face when giving me that assignment", followed by a demeaning joke: "She said I would be good at that (referring to cleaning elders when they wet themselves), in a spotting manner".

Discrimination. Under this subtheme, the destructive leader was hostile based on a protected characteristic (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity...). This occurred in four incidents. According to one account, the leader used a stereotype to embarrass the subordinate: "They ridiculed me in front of my colleagues, stating I was lazy, but this was expected of me due to my ethnic background". Another instance involved sex-based discrimination: "I picked something up from the floor. The leader then said "what are you doing? Trying to show us all what you look like in doggy?"... He told me it was obvious the only reason I had picked up the piece of paper from the floor was to get attention by showing what I would look like in a sex position…He then asked the other colleagues (all male) whether they instantly thought of me in a sex position when I did this".

Distortion of Reality

The second most frequent pattern of behavior was "Distortion of Reality", reported in 36% of incidents. This theme encompasses various manipulative behaviors aimed at distorting facts and misrepresenting reality. The outcomes were usually the advancement or protection of the leader's image, at the expense of the subordinate's reputation.

Blame-shifting was a manipulative behavior used to avoid accountability and embarrassment. One participant explained: “When he realized the first damage, he went into defensive mode, covering his tracks and blaming me and a colleague…instead of having an honest conversation with the founder of the company, he started to throw people under the bus”. Meanwhile, one leader used **gaslighting** to avoid accountability: “He got angry that I had followed their instructions on a task and then refused to admit those were the instructions they had given”. **Credit theft** was another manipulative behavior, used to seek undeserved praise: “I worked hard on a project, worked overtime to finish it. And when we got praise for it, the supervisor pretended to have done it himself”.

Destructive leaders also undermined their subordinates behind their backs, using **negative gossip**, reported as follows: “He was talking about me in a negative manner”; “When I called in sick, he didn’t believe me, and talked mean about me behind my back to other supervisors”. In a more severe example, a destructive leader lodged a complaint without providing prior feedback, blindsiding the subordinate: “It was not in the open up until she filed a complaint to upper management about my professional behavior. I was utterly surprised since no direct feedback happened up until then”.

Moreover, destructive leaders also **manipulated systems and information** to harm subordinates’ standing. One respondent reported their leader falsified information about them: “They asked the company lawyer to change his consultation, so my decision would be proven wrong. Further, she had asked the controller to register a fake audit finding, implying I was a risk for the company”. Additionally, one leader reportedly manufactured a situation to embarrass the subordinate: “I was told I was condescending and rude. I was scheduled to work with a client directly after the meeting, which I felt was staged to motivate me to quit. It was scary and

upsetting". Finally, one leader **lied** about their subordinate to make them look bad: "My leader lied to my manager about me missing work".

Additionally, destructive leaders **exploited personal boundaries** to further their agendas. One respondent mentioned confiding in her leader, which was used against her in a job evaluation: "A few times we talked on a more personal level, and I expressed my uncertainty about my ability to be in my position, as I was recently promoted… Opened up to her as she also talked with me about her personal life struggles…She later used that in my job evaluation to show that I am not fit for this position if I don't believe in myself, so she prolonged my trial period". Another recalled how their leader crossed boundaries by revealing inappropriate information: "The first time the destructive leader behaved inappropriately was to share information about her personal life to test how I would react…Without any notice, the destructive leader shared what she did on the weekend, and it was very graphic.".

Dysfunctional Leadership

The final theme is "Dysfunctional Leadership", which occurred in 30% of incidents. It encompasses instances where leaders failed to uphold constructive leadership. Two subthemes are present: "Power and Control" and "Neglectful Leadership".

Power and Control. This subtheme involves incidents where the leader asserted their authority and used it to **control or intimidate** subordinates. One participant recalled: "The leader wrote, 'You are explicitly instructed to execute as I say, as I want to avoid misalignment'. In another instance, the leader reversed a hiring decision made for a direct reporting of mine". Another explained: "From the very first interaction, it was clear this manager was hard to please…He did not smile, did not shake my hand, just gave me an instruction and immediately

asked me about some work and how I was going to handle this… His behavior was trying to intimidate and motivate me…And show authority".

Moreover, leaders restricted their subordinates' autonomy and influenced their work. One participant reported that their leader **hijacked their task**, preventing them from speaking during an interview. Another discussed the extreme **micromanagement** they endured: "Literally sitting next to me and telling me minute by minute what to do." Sometimes, leaders **imposed unrealistic demands** on their subordinates: "The destructive leader set unrealistic goals based on his understanding of the instructions received…and forced them on the destructive leader's team members". Another respondent reported a similar situation: "We had a deadline to complete, but she had given us the wrong date for that deadline…We tried to tell her that she sent us the wrong date, but she did not listen to that, but just forced us to work 15 hour shifts that day and the day after". One participant reported their leader **withheld overtime wage** they owed: "The supervisor pretended to have done that himself and also did not pay me…. I think it is clear why he did it: he could". Overall, these instances demonstrate how destructive leaders abuse their power and authority to control and exploit subordinates from the get-go.

Neglectful Leadership. This subtheme involves leaders failing or refusing to support their subordinates. One participant described how their leader **failed to intervene and support** them during an escalation situation with a customer and blamed them when it was someone else's fault. Another situation involved a respondent being **explicitly refused help**: "In a meeting, I told her about a problem I was facing that could only be solved by the management, and she told me I should be able to solve it on my own…I am now convinced that she wanted to force me to leave the company, which she actually did in the end". Another participant recalled their leader being "rude and short" with them because of a **personal bias**: "I know why she acted

this way, because I used to date a friend of hers. So, I figure she was mad about me breaking up with her friend. She was just very annoyed the whole day I was there, and it was very visible".

Table 3

Themes, Descriptions, and Key Behaviors of the Leader's Conduct During the First Critical Incident

Themes	Summary description	Subtheme & Key Behaviors
Interpersonal Hostility	Antagonistic and aggressive behaviors, typically aimed at diminishing the subordinate's self-confidence and sense of competence.	**Belittlement and undermining:** Incompetence accusation; Questioning integrity; Demeaning feedback; Inexperience belittlement; Mockery **Discrimination:** Gender and ethnic based hostility
Distortion of Reality	Manipulative behaviors aimed at distorting facts and misrepresenting reality	Blame-shifting; Gaslighting; Credit theft; Negative gossip; Manipulation of systems and information; Deception; Exploiting personal boundaries
Dysfunctional Leadership	Misuse of authority and power to intimidate, control and exploit subordinates, as well as failure to support and guide subordinates when needed	**Power and control:** Intimidation; Task hijacking; Micromanagement; Unrealistic demands; Wage withholding **Neglectful leadership:** Failing to support; Personal bias.

Subordinates' Reactions

The second research question was "How did subordinates react to the first critical incident of abuse?". Coding revealed 19 behaviors, which were refined into eight codes. These codes were grouped into three themes: "Passive Coping", "Active Resolution", and "Compliance". An overview of themes and key behaviors is shown in Table 4.

Passive Coping

"Passive Coping" involves the subordinate withdrawing or avoiding the incident or the leader. It was the most common behavioral pattern, reported in 60% of responses. Within this theme, **silence** was the most prevalent tactic, accounting for 88% of reactions. Several reasons drove silent behaviors. Participants often remained silent out of **fear of conflict**: "I just listened and didn't say much to her…I think if I had reacted, it would have been a fight"; "I didn't say anything because he was my boss, so I didn't want to get into a fight with him"; "I ignored him…I was scared that my complaints would reach him back". Similarly, some respondents **feared negative career repercussions**: "I didn't respond… I was afraid that I might jeopardize my career if I said something"; "I didn't want to put my career at risk by responding in kind. I never reported them". In contrast, one participant used silence as an **ingratiation technique**, remaining silent around the leader to "please him". These responses show the belief and fear that leaders would retaliate if subordinates spoke up.

Some respondents stayed silent due to **normalization of their leader's behavior**; they were told the hostile behavior was "known and accepted" and to "not listen to it". Others attempted to speak up but were unable to because they **lacked power and authority**: "I had not been in the company long enough"; "I couldn't talk back due to the hierarchical structure"; "I tried talking, but it was impossible.". Furthermore, some silence was driven by **emotion**, like

confusion and self-blame: “I was very confused and kinda blamed myself”; “I didn’t feel I can complain about her behavior as I felt it is my own fault”. Others were silent because of shock, ranging from feeling “very surprised” to being “gobsmacked”.

Participants also engaged in **avoidance** behaviors, such as actively distancing themselves from the leader. Two participants reported they “looked for ways to avoid” the leader, for example by “avoiding working on days I knew he worked”. One participant withdrew attempts to help their leader: “I stopped giving tips or making comments because I felt it wasn’t catching on anyway”.

Active Resolution

This theme includes direct attempts at addressing the incident, reported in 30% of incidents. One strategy involved **confronting the destructive leader.** Sometimes the participant explained the adverse effects of the destructive leader’s behavior: “I confronted the leader about how it made me feel.” Other times involved addressing the leader’s conduct, setting boundaries, and conveying that the behavior was inappropriate: “Instantly I said to him “Can I talk to you? I am really not okay with you speaking to/ about me like this”. We went outside and he told me…I said that was not what he did, rather he ridiculed me publicly…”. Another respondent explained to their leader how they could have approached the situation differently: “I spoke to him and I told him that he had not formed the right opinion and that he should have spoken to me privately and not in front of all our colleagues”.

Meanwhile, participants **communicated with higher-level employees**, such as “the president of the company”, “senior colleagues”, “the destructive leader’s boss”, and the “big boss”. Some respondents reported they reached out to others to understand the leader’s behavior: “I was confused and asked about it”; “I was quite shocked by his style…I spoke to the leader’s

boss about it". A few participants felt a desire to and even attempted to lodge formal complaints against the leader. Efforts were met with resistance. One participant "tried to report it, but the destructive leader blocked that", while another explained that complaints (from her and other employees) were met with dismissal. Finally, one respondent showed a desire to report the destructive leader, which was discouraged by others: "I wanted to report it to the university but was told that it would only harm me as academia protects each other".

Compliance

This final theme includes instances where subordinates responded by increasing work efforts and complying with the leader's demands. This behavior was sometimes fueled by self-doubt: "I thought she must have been right. I tried to work harder, listen to what she said, try to implement the feedback, and perceive it as something I can learn from, even though it felt harsh". Similarly, in response to their leader's dissatisfaction, one participant stated, "I was sad that I didn't make it, and I promised I would do better next time". The desire to prove the destructive leader wrong also motivated work efforts: "I responded by working hard and proving to my managers that I was capable". Lastly, one participant assimilated into the abusive culture, participating in the abuse targeted at him: "I always laughed at their comments as if I were part of the joke, despite the impact it had on me".

Table 4

Themes, Descriptions, and Key Behaviors in Subordinates' Responses to the First Critical Incident

Themes	Summary description	Subtheme & Key Behaviors
Passive Coping	Avoidant and withdrawal behavior	Silence; Avoidance; Withdrawal
Active Resolution	Actions aimed at addressing the incident	Confrontation with destructive leader; Communication with higher-level authorities; Reporting attempts
Compliance	Increasing work efforts and complying with destructive leader's demands	Increasing work efforts; Participation in abusive dynamics

Subordinates' Responses and Emotions

A co-occurrence analysis was conducted to answer the sub-question "What emotions co-occurred with the subordinates' behavioral reactions?". The results are presented in Table 5. Anger was the most frequently felt emotion, followed by confusion, sadness, fear, self-doubt, and stress, in that order.

Table 5

Co-occurrence of Emotions and Subordinates' Reactions (Themes)

	Passive Coping	Active Resolution	Compliance
Anger	16	7	1
Confusion	10	4	1
Fear	7	2	2
Sadness	8	4	1
Self-doubt	9	1	2
Stress	1	2	1

Note. Values represent the number of times a specific emotion was reported and co-occurred with each theme.

Leader's Reactions

The third research question was "What were the leader's behavioral reactions to the subordinates' response?". The survey aimed to capture immediate behaviors, but many participants described longer-term behaviors. These behaviors were still considered because silence was the most common subordinate response, which may not have elicited an immediate or visible leader reaction. As a result, two themes emerged: "Immediate Reactions" and "Longer-term Behavior". An overview of themes and key behaviors is shown in Table 6.

Immediate Leader Reactions

This theme encompasses leaders' reactions that occurred within close temporal proximity to the subordinates' response. One prevalent reaction was **dismissal**, occurring in 62% of immediate responses. This involved the leader reacting indifferently and minimizing or invalidating the subordinate's response. One participant reported that anyone who complained was told they could leave the organization, reflecting complete disregard for the complaints. Responses were also treated as overreactions: "He told me that I was being dramatic and too emotional, and that this was the kind of reason that all the men didn't like working with women, as they have to be so sensitive around us". In another case, the leader minimized the incident, explaining that working 15-hour shifts to meet a deadline is "normal and part of the job". Additionally, leaders dismissed bystanders who tried to intervene: "The general director was in front and tried to explain, but the CEO didn't leave any room for that".

Furthermore, leaders displayed **inappropriate emotional reactions**. One leader "laughed away" their subordinate's complaint. Another leader "was mad" and "didn't look" at the subordinate for two days of work. Silent treatment was also used: "She just left me alone right after I put the bread down and stopped talking to me".

Long-term Behavior

Concerning long-term behavior, participants described that the abuse (1) continued without changes in behavior; (2) escalated in severity or frequency; and (3) improved. The first pattern was the most common, occurring in 67% of responses. **Continuation of abuse** was reflected in the following statements: "She continued that behavior"; "He did not stop this kind of behavior and would always pick on me"; "This went on for three weeks"; "When this incident repeated itself a month later…". For others, the **behavior escalate**d, reported 26% of the time. One participant recalled "incidents like this occurring more and more often", reflecting an

increase in frequency. Meanwhile, others reported **increased severity** of abuse; one participant described the critical incident as "just the beginning of a series of bullying, aggressive, and misogynistic incidents that got worse and worse". Another reported that "the sharing of personal information/ activities escalated and became more graphic in nature". One respondent noted, "The second day it escalated even further…he threatened he would fire me the first chance he got". Finally, the support from another employee triggered the escalation: "He (the CEO) heard me out and was always nicer to me than to her. Although that in turn made it even worse".

In three instances, the abusive behaviors **improved**. One described that "even though he still had similar outbursts like that on occasion, it did seem like he reflected on his behavior, and they occurred less often over time". Another attributed the perceived improvement to adapting to the hostility: "After coming into work more often, the treatment did get better (also because you get used to it, of course)". For the third respondent, the behavior reduced dramatically because "senior management listened and took a decision to remove her from the managerial position".

Table 6

Themes, Descriptions, and Key Behaviors in Leader Reactions to Subordinate Responses

Themes	Summary description	Subtheme & Key Behaviors
Immediate reactions	Minimizing or invalidating subordinates' response or complaint	Dismissal; Inappropriate emotional responses
Longer-term behavior	Indication of how the behavior evolved over time, from this first critical incident.	Continued behavior; Escalation in frequency or intensity; Behavioral improvement

Bystander Reactions

The final research question was "How did bystanders react to the first critical incident of abuse?". Coding identified 15 behaviors which were refined into six codes, leading to three themes: "Supportive Behavior", "Hostile/ Unsupportive Behavior", and "Passive/ Indifferent Behavior". An overview of themes and key behaviors is shown in Table 7.

Supportive Behavior

"Supportive Behavior" involves the bystander siding with and supporting the victim and contains two subthemes: "Active Behaviors" and "Passive Behaviors".

Active Behaviors. This subtheme encompasses direct and covert behaviors, typically occurring during or shortly after the critical incident. Some bystanders defended the victim as the incident unfolded: "Other leaders had to rectify him…I said nothing. I let the others defend me"; "The general director was in front and tried to explain…". Bystanders who were also experiencing hostility attempted to voice similar concerns: "Colleagues around the destructive leader had the same complaints and concerns, and they communicated them to the leader through various channels". In some cases, bystanders took more serious actions against the leader. One participant described how their colleagues helped "boycott the manager", while another mentioned that her management removed the leader from her managerial position.

Passive Behaviors. These responses were emotional or relational, focusing on the subordinate rather than the leader. They often occurred after the critical incident. The most prevalent pattern involved remaining silent in the moment, and following up with the victim after: "Colleagues who stayed silent and followed up only offline with me"; "The other prosecutors who felt sorry and ashamed, but who kept silent at the time"; "Whilst one boy later

said to me he didn't think it was cool what he (the leader) had said". Several participants reported feeling supported or validated by others: "One colleague was very open and straightforward with me, supported me"; "my colleagues and other team leaders were on my side"; and one respondent stated they received some support from their co-supervisor.

Hostile/ Unsupportive Behaviors

This theme involves bystanders opposing the victim. It sometimes occurred subtly; for instance, one participant described, "There were two other people in the same department, who only witnessed the public outburst of him telling me I wouldn't help him. I spoke with them afterwards, one believed me, the other didn't". Not believing the victim could reflect a lack of support. Opposition was also clearly shown: "Some of the other boys laughed"; "They (the bystanders) were laughing"; "Other senior team members were present, and they seemed to enjoy and take part in this momentarily. One thing is for certain, they did not act to stop it"; "Human resources and my cases manager – neither were helpful, and both were compliant/ complicit in the behavior/ attitudes toward me".

Passive/ Indifferent Behaviors

The final theme encompasses passive behaviors, often exhibited through **inaction,** where bystanders did not intervene during or after the incident. Respondents linked these behaviors to the fact that bystanders were experiencing the same hostility. There was "no reaction, as they were used to this behavior"; "I understood later, the other three were already "burnt out" and almost apathetic because they had been treated in much the same way before by the destructive leader". These instances suggest that bystanders accepted the behavior, as reflected here: "Most of them just ignored the behavior and kind of accepted it". In some cases, the inaction reflected powerlessness: "It was rare that people were finding the power to oppose him".

Table 7

Themes, Descriptions, and Key Behaviors in Bystander Reactions to the First Critical Incident

Themes	Summary description	Subtheme & Key Behaviors
Supportive behavior	Supporting the victim, actively and emotionally	**Active behaviors:** Defending the victim; Voicing similar concerns; Boycotting the leader **Passive behaviors:** Emotional support following the incident
Hostile/ Unsupportive behavior	Implicitly or explicitly opposing the victim	Not believing the victim; Laughing at the victim; Complicit in the abuse
Passive/ Indifferent behavior	Lack of intervention during or after critical incident, usually due to experiencing the same abuse	Inaction

Discussion

This study qualitatively explored the first critical incident of abusive supervision from 52 former victims, focusing on the leader's initial behavior (RQ1), the subordinates' behavioral and emotional response (RQ2), the leader's reaction to that response (RQ3), and bystanders' reactions (RQ4).

The Nature of the First Critical Incident

Three themes emerged regarding the leaders' initial behavior: "Interpersonal Hostility", "Distortion of Reality", and "Dysfunctional Leadership". To begin, some coded behaviors matched items in Tepper's (2000) Abusive Supervision Scale. 53% of the scale's items appeared in participants' recollections, while some of the remaining items were present in different forms. For instance, "Silent treatment" was reported as a leader's reaction, but not as a critical incident behavior. Meanwhile, the item "Lied to me" was present, under "Distortion of Reality; however, in this case, the leader lied about the subordinate, not to them. Moreover, no items appeared under "Dysfunctional Leadership". The scale's difficulty in capturing early behaviors might suggest that early abusive dynamics differ from longer-term ones. However, the scale has been criticized for containing ambiguous items that focus solely on perceptions rather than objective behaviors with unclear boundaries (Fischer et al., 2021), and items that vary in severity (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2021). Therefore, future research could replicate this study using other scales, such as Mitchell and Ambrose's (2007) scale. New scales could also be developed specifically to capture early-abuse dynamics.

Additionally, it was expected that leader behaviors during the first critical incident would be subtle and covert, based on interpersonal aggression research. Some similarities were observed. Manipulative behaviors under "Distortion of Reality" match manipulation that occurs at the beginning of domestic abusive relationships (Short et al., 2000; Daw et al., 2023). Meanwhile, workplace bullying begins with work-related hostility (Krishna et al., 2023), aligning with competence undermining and demeaning feedback under "Interpersonal Hostility". However, abusive supervision generally began with overt behaviors that were openly targeted at the subordinate, and half the time, they occurred in front of others.

Power imbalance may explain the absence of covert behaviors at the onset of abusive supervision. In workplace bullying, victims can face harassment from co-workers who lack significant authority over them (Einarsen et al., 2002). This may prevent the display of overt hostility immediately, as victims may not be afraid and may be more likely to report it. In domestic abusive relationships, the abuser uses covert and subtle psychological manipulation to gain control over their victims (Daw et al., 2023). In abusive supervision, the abusive supervisor already has authority over the victim due to their supervisory role, making subtle behaviors less necessary. This use of authority aligns with the abuse of power noted under "Dysfunctional Leadership", where leaders used their power to control and intimidate employees. Finally, many participants reported that their leader had already been abusing others when the first incident occurred. Perhaps the leader felt confident engaging in openly antagonistic behaviors because they were already doing so, with little to no resistance.

Abusive supervision did not follow the escalation pattern of other types of interpersonal aggression (e.g., workplace bullying, domestic abuse), which invites future research to examine this more closely. Power and authority appear to influence the onset, aligning with research on abusive supervision and power distance (e.g., acceptance of unequal power distribution), which has a moderating effect on outcomes (Zhang & Liao, 2015). Replicating this study can help confirm whether abusive supervision indeed begins with overt and active behaviors and whether perceptions of supervisor authority affect these behaviors. It is possible that respondents did not recall the first incident but rather the most vivid one, which could explain why active behaviors were reported. Therefore, future research should include a time-based inclusion criterion (e.g., abusive supervision occurring within the last year) to reduce memory decay. Semi-structured

interviews could be beneficial. Indeed, asking questions could lead interviewees to think of and discuss covert instances of abuse that they did not consider abusive at the time.

Subordinates' Responses

Subordinates' responses were categorized into three themes: "Passive Coping" (avoidance and withdrawal), "Active Resolution" (directly addressing the incident), and "Compliance" (increased work efforts). These themes partially align with Klaussner's Dyadic Process Model (2013), which proposes that leader hostility triggers perceptions of injustice, which prompt active and passive, functional and dysfunctional responses. The theme "Active Resolution" aligns with active functional responses, both aiming at reconciliation by directly addressing the incident. Meanwhile, "Passive Coping" aligns with passive functional responses, involving covert actions indirectly addressing the incident. The theme "Compliance" is an active response and indirectly matches the functional category; it aims to avoid further abuse by complying with the abusive supervisor. Dysfunctional responses were absent in this study. Overall, this is tentative evidence for Klaussner's (2013) framework, suggesting future research to test the model empirically. Research should also examine whether feelings of injustice motivate subordinate responses to initial abuse.

Meanwhile, some behaviors matched the EVLN model (Hirschmann, 1970), while others varied. Concerning the exit strategy, former victims were expected to report turnover intentions and CWB following initial abuse. Results somewhat aligned with this expectation. No former victims reported leaving immediately after the incident. One expressed an immediate desire to leave, while others stated they left eventually. Job market and economic concerns, such as lack of other accessible options or high costs of leaving (continuance commitment; Breevaart et al., 2022). may explain the lack of immediate exit. Additionally, the first incident may not have been

concerning enough to warrant such a drastic measure. Furthermore, hostile climates where abusive supervision is normalized are barriers to leaving (Breevaart et al., 2022). Participants reported normalization of hostile behavior, suggesting hostile climates that could have decreased turnover intentions. Moreover, CWB was not reported, disproving the negative reciprocity principle (Greco et al., 2019) and Emotional Process Theory (Oh & Farh, 2017). Self-control may explain this. Lian et al. (2012) demonstrated that individuals low in self-control are more likely to retaliate against abusive supervision. This self-control may be higher during initial abuse, since resource depletion has not occurred yet. Furthermore, retaliation may have been too risky due to the power imbalance.

Neglect behaviors were also expected, in the form of disregarding work, silent behaviors, and distancing. Disregarding work responsibilities was not observed – this has been linked to loss of resources and increased exhaustion (Malik et al., 2023), which may not have occurred yet. Silence was considered a neglect behavior since it resembled knowledge withholding and was the most common response. It was often motivated by fear of retaliation, conflict, and negative career consequences. This is consistent with research showing that fear leads to silence as an avoidance strategy (Kiewitz et al., 2016). In this study, negative feelings were associated with silent behaviors, aligning with research linking abusive supervision, psychological distress, and silent behaviors (Park et al., 2018). In line with EPT (Oh & Farh, 2017), fear often co-occurred with passive coping behaviors. However, other negative emotions were reported more often, such as anger, confusion, self-doubt, and sadness.

Former victims were also expected to report confronting their supervisors or communicating with others (voice strategy). This aligns with “Active Resolution”, where subordinates discussed complaints with their leaders and other employees. Interestingly, Schyns

et al.'s (2018) finding that employees prefer using a prohibitive voice (voicing complaints) with higher authorities was observed in this study. Additionally, anger was the most common emotion associated with "Active Resolution", consistent with EPT (Oh & Farh, 2017), which proposes that anger leads to voice.

Mentions of loyalty behavior (e.g., supervisor and organizational commitment) were rare; only one participant cited loyalty to their leader as a reason for remaining silent. The theme "Compliance" could align with loyalty; some participants complied with their leader's demands and increased work efforts, driven by the desire to prove their leader wrong or because they believed the leader's demeaning feedback. This aligns with the performance enhancement pathway (e.g., hostility increases performance) (Tepper, 2017) and ingratiation behaviors that participants in this study used to appease their abusive supervisor (Yagil et al., 2011).

Overall, the EVLN Model struggles to capture subordinates' responses to initial abuse. Typical neglect, exit, and loyalty behaviors are absent, and voice is limited. Silence was categorized under neglect due to its similarity to knowledge withholding, but it does not officially belong in the model. Meanwhile, "Compliance" could be related to loyalty; however, officially, it is not present in the model. Silence and compliance behaviors may reflect specific early abuse behaviors, which could be integrated into the EVLN model or an early-abuse framework. Research could also focus on establishing an abusive supervision timeline. Indeed, silence and compliance arose as initial abuse behaviors. Meanwhile, CWB and job neglect were not reported, although they are positively related to full-blown abusive supervision. Perhaps there are conditions under which CWB and job neglect arise. However, social desirability bias may explain the lack of CWB and job neglect; respondents may not have wanted to report their negative behavior.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Coping Framework may more adequately capture early abuse dynamics. This framework categorizes responses into two groups. First is problem-solving coping, which involves addressing and ending the negative behavior; this aligns with "Active Resolution". Then there is emotion-focused coping, involving alleviating stress caused by the negative behavior; this resembles "Passive Coping". The theme "Compliance" could fit under problem-focused coping, since it aims to reduce negative behavior by pleasing the leader. Future research should explore early abuse dynamics using this framework.

Finally, emotion categories were analyzed alongside behaviors, demonstrating that negative emotions arise from the beginning. However, co-occurrence analysis does not show whether and which of these emotions motivated behaviors, as EPT suggests (Oh & Farh, 2017). Participants also reported multiple emotions simultaneously, making it harder to establish a link between specific emotions and behaviors. Future research should test whether and which emotions drive these behaviors.

Leaders' Reactions

Leader reactions were grouped under two themes. The first, "Immediate Reactions", involved dismissive and inappropriate emotional responses, typically occurring when subordinates confronted their leaders. This is consistent with findings that managers react negatively to negative feedback (Fast et al., 2014; Niemann et al., 2014). These reactions also align with reactions narcissistic leaders tend to have, who are also more prone to exhibit abusive supervision (Finney et al., 2021). Indeed, narcissistic leaders react negatively when they feel their self-esteem is threatened, which triggers abusive supervision (Gauglitz et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, previous studies indicated that making leaders aware of their hostility, for example through voice, could lead to positive leader reactions (Liao et al., 2018; Shi et al.,

2023). This was not observed in this study. The fact that voice only elicited negative reactions suggests that how complaints are framed may be important. Research has shown that different ways of framing feedback influence outcomes. For example, positively framed feedback, which is more supportive, is positively associated with performance, while negative feedback, which tends to be critical, negatively impacts performance (Su et al., 2022). Considering that managers can be feedback adverse, exploring ways to present complaints that do not trigger defensiveness could be interesting for future research.

Regarding longer-term behaviors, abuse either continued, escalated, or, in rare cases, improved. The continuation and escalation of abuse often coincided with subordinates' silent behaviors, suggesting that silent behaviors signal to destructive leaders that the behavior is acceptable. Escalation in response to confrontation could be explained by the negative reciprocity principle (Greco et al., 2019); leaders could have perceived the complaint as a negative behavior, prompting an adverse reaction. An interesting observation was that leaders never responded positively to "Compliance" behaviors.

According to Klaussner (2013), leaders evaluate subordinates' behaviors and, if deemed "inadequate", impose stricter sanctions and punishments. Therefore, if behavior is adequate or improves, sanctions should be reduced or removed. In this study, even when behavior improved, such as through increased work efforts, the leader did not reduce or remove harsh treatment. Possibly, although employees increased their work efforts, the outcome was still considered "inadequate". Conversely, destructive leaders may believe their harsh tactics were effective in improving performance, leading them to reuse such methods. This aligns with Farmanara's (2021) case study, in which managers believed harsh tactics effectively enhanced work performance. It also aligns with research on abusive supervision instrumentality, which examines

whether leaders consider abusive supervision as useful in increasing work performance. Watkins et al. (2019) confirmed this, finding that leaders' instrumentality beliefs significantly predicted abusive supervision. Research could focus on ways to disprove this belief of abusive supervision instrumentality, especially since over time, abusive supervision is negatively related to job performance.

In some instances, abuse improved. One leader reportedly reflected on their behavior, leading to a reduction in hostility. This indirectly supports Liao et al.'s (2018) finding that supervisors engage in constructive behaviors once they realize they acted abusively. Meanwhile, one reported that habituation to the abuse was the reason for improvement. This is related to emotional habituation in the EPT (Oh & Farh, 2017). The authors suggest that repeatedly perceiving hostile behaviors results in experiencing the same appraisals and associations. Over time, this leads to desensitization, where hostility "feels like" it is getting better, but objectively, the behaviors themselves are not improving. This idea of habituation should be investigated further.

Bystander Reactions

Bystander reactions were classified into three themes. The first is "Supportive Behaviors", including siding with the victim and boycotting the leader. These behaviors align with positive behavioral tendencies found in previous research, such as defending or siding with the victim (Priesemuth & Schimke, 2019) and supporting the victim (Mitchell et al., 2015). The second theme, "Passive/Indifferent Reactions" includes bystander inaction and passivity, often associated with bystanders who were also being abused. This aligns with previous research findings. For instance, Yu et al. (2022) reported that fear drove inaction because employees wanted to avoid becoming targets. In this study, bystanders may have thought that defending the

victim would lead to retaliation and thus remained inactive. Moreover, bystanders' silence mirrored the silence observed among coworkers in Huang et al.'s (2019) study. Overall, the theme "Passive/Indifferent Reactions" aligns with avoidance-oriented behavior, which is a prevalent but under-researched bystander response to witnessing abusive supervision (Zhang et al., 2020). Indeed, it has received little attention because the focus has been primarily on fear and anger-triggering approach behaviors (Zhang et al., 2020). Thus, this study supports the argument that avoidant bystander strategies should be further examined.

Unsupportive behavior was the last theme, manifesting as mocking and participating in abuse. It was less common and aligns with coworker exclusion behaviors, including social exclusion of the victim and direct derogation (Mitchell et al., 2015). It is difficult to determine whether bystanders were actively acting against the victim (e.g., they believed the victim deserved mistreatment) or were following along with the abuse to avoid being victimized. Nonetheless, the intent did not negate the adverse nature of the behavior. Future research can explore why bystanders may integrate into the abusive dynamics. This was done in workplace bullying, where it was found that employees participated in bullying dynamics because they were unaware of the bullying or were scared to become victims (Jönsson & Muhonen, 2022).

Practical Implications

Normalization of abusive supervision is a major concern because it not only stops victims from leaving (Breevaart et al., 2022) but also fosters the development of these abusive relationships. Therefore, it is important to make leaders and employees aware that hostile behaviors are unacceptable and can have detrimental effects. Training programs and seminars can help employees recognize and understand these behaviors, allowing them to easily identify when a leader is being hostile and potentially abusive. The key behaviors and themes from this

study can also be integrated into leader training programs to help leaders recognize their behavior and teach them how to be more supportive of their subordinates (Zhang & Bendall, 2015; Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2016). The second step involves establishing formal communication channels where victims can file complaints, but not only during full-blown abusive supervision. From the beginning, employees who believe they are experiencing hostile behaviors should be able to track these behaviors so that, over time, a pattern can emerge, making it easier to lodge official complaints. This could be done alongside anonymous hotlines (Mackey et al., 2017), where anonymity may encourage employees to come forward and reduce biases that people working for the organization (e.g., Human Resources) might have. Moreover, this study found that subordinate negative responses to abusive supervision, such as CWB, do not arise immediately. This may show that it is crucial for victims to discuss their negative perceptions before they escalate into negative and harmful behaviors. Interventions should also focus on bystanders, who can perpetuate negative behaviors and feelings. Training bystanders on how to support and react proactively to abusive supervision can help break the cycle and contribute to reducing abusive supervision.

Limitations and Future Research

This study's strength lies in its qualitative approach, which has been lacking in abusive supervision research. It provides rich and insightful perspectives on the early stages of abusive supervision. The use of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), a well-known and valid method, reinforces this strength. Inductive thematic analysis enabled the discovery of new patterns, thereby opening up new research avenues. Finally, the survey provided access to sensitive information that individuals might find difficult to share and that I, as a student researcher, would have struggled to obtain otherwise.

The next step for research in early-abuse dynamics would be to replicate this research using interviews or diary studies, which could provide further insights and clarification. This research could confirm the key behaviors and themes found in this study, while also grounding them within relevant theories, as discussed in the findings. One interesting study to investigate the evolution of abusive supervision could be a longitudinal diary study involving newly hired employees. These employees would keep a diary in which they track their leader's behavior on a weekly or monthly basis. If hostile behaviors occur, they are prompted to provide details about their feelings, attributions, and sensemaking processes, which can also be done in follow-up interviews. There would be several constraints, including a low base rate, participants losing interest, and a risk to confidentiality. However, it would be a study design that addresses most of the limitations in abusive supervision research.

There were some constraints related to the research design. Abusive supervision is a subjective concept, meaning that personal biases can influence recollections. Additionally, the CIT requires participants to recall past experiences, which are not always accurate. Some participants reported difficulties in remembering the incident. It is also possible that they were not recalling the first incident, but rather the most vivid incident. This is partly related to Tepper's (2000) scale, mentioned earlier in the discussion. Moreover, the survey had a low completion rate, and some responses were vague or brief. This indicates a lack of interest or motivation, which could be remedied with incentives and rewards. Some participants misunderstood questions and provided answers related to the overall relationship instead of the specific incident; this could be rectified through semi-structured interviews, where follow-up questions can help with clarification and understanding. Additionally, the coding was conducted

independently, making inter-rater reliability checks impossible. Future research should involve multiple coders to increase the reliability of results.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study examined various dynamics surrounding the first critical incident of abuse. Abusive supervisors generally exhibited overt hostility, manipulation, and abuse of power during the initial incident. Subordinates most often responded with silence, accompanied by various negative emotions. When they confronted their leaders, they usually received dismissive or mocking reactions. When bystanders were present, they usually supported the victim or remained passive due to experiencing similar abuse. This study contributed to the literature by investigating the onset of abusive supervision, a topic that has not been previously investigated. It opens many doors to future research, including theory testing and development, and study replication. Practically, findings can help spread awareness of this harmful phenomenon, in hopes of decreasing its prevalence.

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Appendix A

Survey Instructions, Information, Tepper's (2000) Items, and All Questions

Introduction:

Dear sir/madam,

You are about to participate in a questionnaire study by the Erasmus University Rotterdam and Tilburg University about your experience with destructive leadership. The goal of this study is to shed light on how relationships with a destructive leader arise and evolve. This study will provide insights into possible ways to help employees dealing with destructive leaders and to make recommendations to important stakeholders in practice (such as HR, policy makers, professional caregivers) how to help employees.

We will first ask you several questions about your experience with destructive leadership. We can imagine that reliving these experiences may bring back some unpleasant feelings and emotions. If this is the case, we would like to make the following suggestions:

- Contact your general practitioner
- Contact the researchers (see below for contact information)

Finally, we will ask you for some demographic information. Filling out the questionnaire will take around 15 minutes. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. Only the researchers will be able to see you answers. Even so, they will not be able to connect your given answers to you as an individual. All data will be stored on a university server. Data will be processed confidentially, will be used for scientific purposes only, and may be published in an academic journal. We will not ask you to identify the destructive leader; we focus exclusively on your experiences with this leader without having to know who this person is. Your participation

in this study is voluntary and you can withdraw your participation at any time. Conform the European privacy law, your data will be stored and managed safely for 10 years.

This study is conducted with the approval of the ethical committee of the Department of Psychology, Education, and Child Studies. If you want to invoke your rights or if you have a question about privacy related to this study, you can contact the data protection officer (fg@eur.nl) of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Should you have any questions before, during, or after the study, please contact Dr. Kimberley Breevaart (breevaart@essb.eur.nl).

Thank you very much for your participation on behalf of the entire research team,

Dr. Kimberley Breevaart

Dr. Ivana Vranjes

Informed Consent

By signing this form:

1. I give permission for participation in this study;
2. I confirm that I am at least 18 years of age;
3. I indicate that I understand that participation in this study is completely voluntary and
4. I indicate that I understand that my information will be anonymized with regards to publication, education, and research, unless I give permission to cite my words or the use of my personal information for education and future research.

Citing Permission

I do/do not give permission for citing my words without mentioning my real name. If not, you can still participate in the study.

Self-labeling question

As we previously indicated, we are looking for people who have had experiences with a destructive leader in the past. It is very important that this relationship with the destructive leader lies in the past and is no longer applicable to your current situation. The reason is that we try to answer different research questions in a group of former victims (you) compared to a group of current victims (not you) of destructive leadership. Are you currently a victim of a destructive leader and do you want to partake in research among current victims of destructive leadership? Please contact Dr.Kimberley Breevaart (breevaart@essb.eur.nl) and close the current questionnaire.

Have you been a victim of a destructive leader in the past? Please continue reading.

Because destructive leadership comes in many forms, we will provide you with a definition of a specific type of destructive leadership. We ask you to read this definition and indicate whether or not you recognize yourself in the specific type of destructive leadership that we examine.

Destructive leadership

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

According to this definition, have you been a victim of destructive leadership?

Preliminary questions

How long have you worked under this destructive leader? (If you do not remember exactly, please choose an approximation of the month and year it started and ended)

We will now ask you several questions about the time when you were dealing with the destructive leader. We would like to ask you to think back about this period in your life and to keep this experience in mind when answering the following questions.

To help you do so, can you give a brief description of where you worked at the time and what your relation was to this DL?

Tepper's (2000) Abusive Supervision Scale

How did your destructive leader behave toward you?

(S)he ridiculed me

(S)he told me my thoughts or feelings were stupid

(S)he gave me the silent treatment

(S)he put me down in front of others

(S)he invaded my privacy

(S)he reminded me of my past mistakes and failures

(S)he didn't give me credit for jobs requiring a lot of effort

(S)he blamed me to save himself/herself embarrassment

(S)he broke promises (s)he made

(S)he expressed anger at me when he/she was made for another reason

(S)he made negative comments about me to others

(S)he was rude to me

(S)he did not allow me to interact with other coworkers

(S)he told me I was incompetent

(S)he lied to me

Other, namely

Rated on Likert scale: never, rarely, sometimes, often, always

CIT Questions

Can you describe the specific incident where your leader first behaved destructively toward you?

What happened?

What did your leader do? Why do you think your leader behaved this way? What was the context in which the behavior happened?

How long had you been working together at the time of this first incident and what was your experience with this leader up until that point?

(please specify how many weeks, months, or years you had been working together)

How did you respond to this first incident, and what was the outcome of this response?

How did you feel when this first happened? What emotion(s) did you experience?

Was someone else involved? If yes:

Who else was involved, how did they respond, and what was the outcome of their response?

What were the consequences of this incident for you on the short and longer term?

What were the consequences – if any – for others in your organization? Please specify who these others are (e.g., colleagues, higher management, HR) and what the short and long term consequences were for them.

Thanks for answering these questions. You have almost reached the end of the questionnaire. We have a few questions left about your demographics.

Demographic Questions

How do you identify yourself? Male, female, other, namely and prefer not to say

What is your age?

What is your marital status?

Options: Married, living with a partner, widowed, divorced/ separated, never been married

What is your nationality?

What is the highest level of education you have completed? If none of these options fit with your education, please choose the one that is closest to your education.

Options; High school, bachelor/associate degree, master's degree, doctoral degree, professional degree (JD/MD)

What industry were you working in when you were working with the destructive leader?

Options: Accountancy, banking, and finance; Business, consulting and management; Charity and voluntary work; Creative arts and design; Energy and utilities; Engineering and manufacturing; Environment and agriculture; Healthcare; Hospitality and events management; Information technology; Law; Law enforcement and security; Leisure, sport and tourism; Marketing, advertising and PR; Property and construction; Media and internet; Recruitment and HR; Retail; Sales; Science and pharmaceuticals; Social care; Teacher training and education; Transport and Logistics; Other, namely: