

When Supervision is Abusive: What Explains it and What are the Consequences?

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Abstract: Currently, people spend most of their daytime at work, therefore, it is essential that organisations offer their employees benefits that go beyond the salary, because people value their psychological well-being, which contributes to the quality of life in the workplace and a good work life balance. It is also important to note that interpersonal relationships at work are significant when it comes to organisational well-being. Relationships between subordinates and supervisors must be healthier and trustable relationships. When the opposite occurs, we are faced with abusive supervision with a negative influence on employees' well-being. This study focuses on the relationship between supervisors and subordinates. In order to analyse the impact of a supervisor's attitudes on the relationship with their subordinates, it matters to understand that these attitudes are influenced by their personality traits. The aim of this study is to realise how different personality traits of the supervisor, namely those related to the dark triad, contribute to the development of abusive supervision that will affect the employees' psychological well-being at work. To develop this study, a survey was applied to a sample of 232 employees from different Portuguese organisations, to measure the dark triad, abusive supervision and psychological well-being at work, respectively. After analysing the results using structural equations, it was possible to conclude that psychopathy and machiavellianism, which are two of the dark triad concepts, influence the supervisor's behavior, and further lead to an abusive supervision. Abusive supervision negatively influences the employees' psychological well-being at work. The greater the abusive supervision, the greater the negative emotions felt by employees at the workplace, and therefore, the employees' psychological well-being is lower. This study also highlighted differences in the way men and women perceive abusive supervision, concluding that, although men perceive more abusive supervision than women, they present fewer negative emotions than women. Finally, some conclusions, limitations and possible future research were drawn.

Keywords: Abusive Supervision, Dark Triad, Psychological Well-being

1. Introduction

Since people dedicate a large amount of effort and time to their work, it is essential to understand which variables affect work, given that, nowadays, professional life has a significant impact on people's lives and their well-being (Bartels, Peterson and Reina, 2019).

The dark triad is often found in individuals who hold leadership positions and is related to the dark side of the personality in which people are cold, impulsive, toxic and exploitative (Furtner, Maran and Rauthmann, 2017; Paulhus and Williams, 2002). The attitudes of individuals who hold leadership positions influence the way employees feel in the workplace and take a negative form, when, for example, supervisors ridicule and are hostile towards their subordinates, culminating in abusive supervision that leads to negative consequences for employees (Tepper, 2007).

The present study aims to understand whether the supervisor personality traits that make up the dark triad: psychopathy, narcissism and machiavellianism, contribute to the adoption of abusive supervision. It is important to clarify that this is the employees' perception of the supervisor. The aim of this study is also to understand the impact of abusive supervision, also perceived by subordinates, on their psychological well-being in the workplace.

2. Background

2.1 Abusive Supervision

Tepper (2000, 2007) focused on the study of abusive supervision, defining it as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178).

Whitman, Halbesleben and Shanine (2013) reported that abusive behaviors are considered inappropriate and non-standard behaviors, that is, these behaviors do not respect social norms and can be externalized, for example, when supervisors verbally reprimand subordinates in front of other colleagues or can be more restrained when supervisors withhold confidential information from their subordinates.

The ridicule and blaming of subordinates by supervisors leads to the adoption of abusive supervision that has negative consequences for subordinates and, consequently, for organisations. Abusive behaviors include public ridicule, intimidation, explosive reactions and aggressive eye contact (Tepper, 2007, Tepper, Simon and Park, 2017). Abusive supervision is an organisational problem and is considered an interpersonal aggression, with consequences, both in terms of relationships between supervisors and subordinates and also in their family relationships (Rego and Cunha, 2008; Zhang and Lio, 2015).

It is important to know the antecedents of abusive supervision so that it is possible to carry out adequate management in order to understand that certain individuals cannot occupy supervisory positions, as they will negatively influence the well-being of the entire organisation (Fischer et al, 2021; Gallegos, Guardia-Olmos & Berger, 2022; Moin & Khan, 2023; Moin et al, 2022; Tepper, Moss and Duffy, 2011; Tepper, Simon and Park, 2017).

2.1.1 Dark Triad as Antecedent of Abusive Supervision

According to Paulhus and Williams (2002), there are three personality traits that constitute the dark triad, namely machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism. These characteristics are included in an offensive personality. Individuals who have these personality traits show bad character, with a tendency to self-promote, be aggressive and reveal emotional coldness. According to Jonason et al (2014), the dark triad integrates concepts such as superiority, manipulation, impulsiveness and insensitive social attitudes. These personality traits refer to abnormal or dysfunctional personality and represent a socially harmful nature (Spain, Harms and LeBreton, 2014). The three personality traits that make up the dark triad are different, but reveal similarities between them, such as a core of insensitive manipulation, and these traits are considered malicious and disruptive in general (Furnham, Richards and Paulhus, 2013; Kiazad et al, 2010).

Machiavellianism: The concept of machiavellianism is associated with a lack of empathy, the adoption of manipulative attitudes, little affectivity, the need to explore others and strategic planning (Jones and Paulhus, 2009; Judge, Piccolo and Kosalka, 2009). Machiavellianism is characterised by manipulation, coldness and insensitivity towards others (Vernon et al, 2008) and is also associated with distrust and cynicism from the point of view of Spain, Harms and LeBreton (2014).

Narcissism: Narcissism is characterised by feelings of superiority; a narcissistic individual constantly seeks attention from others and reveals excessive self love (Caniëls and Hatak, 2022; Vernon et al, 2008). Narcissistic individuals desire uninterrupted attention from others (Paulhus, 2014).

On the other hand, Judge, Piccolo and Kosalka (2009) considered that narcissists reveal two sides regarding supervision in organisations, demonstrating a negative side, but also a positive side. The positive aspect is associated with charismatic leadership, innovation, high organisational performance culminated with an excellent vision, and narcissistic supervisors are successful in attracting followers. Thus, narcissistic supervisors can show a negative attitude as well as a beneficial attitude in organisations (Furtner, Maran and Rauthmann, 2017).

Psychopathy: According to Jones and Figueredo (2013), psychopathy is associated with impulsivity, anxiety and constant search for emotion, with individuals being too focused on their goals and ambitions, being insensitive, manipulative and antisocial. From the point of view of Mathieu et al (2014), psychopathy is a clinical concept that has a set of characteristics that include grandiosity, egocentrism, deceit, lack of empathy and tendency to ignore or violate social norms and, therefore, represents an important role in understanding destructive leadership styles and identifying dysfunctional problems in organisations. Supervisors who possess the

personality traits that constitute the dark triad adopt abusive behaviors at work, causing considerable damage to an organisation (Mathieu et al, 2014; Wisse and Sleebos, 2016). Therefore, the following hypotheses were established:

- Hypothesis 1: Supervisors who present personality traits that constitute the dark triad are more likely to exercise abusive supervision.
- Hypothesis 1.1: The supervisor's perceived psychopathy positively influences abusive supervision.
- Hypothesis 1.2: The supervisor's perceived narcissism positively influences abusive supervision.
- Hypothesis 1.3: The supervisor's perceived Machiavellianism positively influences abusive supervision.

2.2 Psychological Well-being at Work

Warr (1990) explained that psychological well-being includes concepts such as affective well-being, competence, aspiration, autonomy, integrative functioning and satisfaction. Measures of affective well-being are one of the most important, if not the most important, indicator of psychological well-being.

Affective well-being can be measured in relation to the job domain and, therefore, measures of work-related affective well-being were presented in two domains that are job-related anxiety-contentment and depression-enthusiasm (Warr, 1994).

2.1.2 Abusive Supervision and Psychological Well-being at Work

According to Zhang and Liao (2015), abusive supervision has negative effects on the employees' psychological well-being because negative workplace environments consume subordinates' psychological resources, which, in turn, have fewer resources to deal with situations that cause stress, leading to dissatisfaction in the workplace.

For Atwater et al (2016), individuals who experience abusive supervision situations accumulate several negative work experiences, resulting in negative affective reactions and emotions, also affecting attitudes and behaviors.

From the point of view of Tepper, Simon and Park (2017), the target individuals of abusive supervision present symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, and involvement in abusive supervision compromises organisational well-being and can cause high levels of depression in subordinates, insomnia and low levels of emotional self-regulation. Abusive supervision causes dysfunctional resistance on the part of subordinates, that is, they refuse to carry out the tasks and requests of their abusive supervisors and this happens mainly when subordinates reveal themselves to have higher levels of awareness, with regard to supervisor's traits of personality (Tepper, 2007). The following hypotheses were established:

- Hypothesis 2: Abusive supervision negatively influences the development of subordinates' psychological well-being at work, with a supervisor who is perceived as abusive contributing to low levels of subordinates' psychological well-being at work.
- Hypothesis 2.1: Abusive supervision positively influences negative affect and therefore leads to low levels of subordinates' psychological well-being at work.
- Hypothesis 2.2: Abusive supervision negatively influences positive affect and, consequently, leads to high levels of subordinates' psychological well-being at work.

3. Methodology

An online questionnaire survey has been administered at individuals over 18 years of age, who have had at least one professional experience. In order to measure personality traits on dark triad, a Portuguese version of the dirty dozen was used (Pechorro et al, 2021). The scale had 12 items (4 items for Machiavellianism, 4 items for psychopathy and four items for narcissism). The original version of dark triad belongs to Jonason and Webster (2010). To measure abusive supervision, Tepper's (2000) fifteen-item scale was used, which in turn was adapted to the Portuguese version by the authors Velez and Neves (2017). Affective well-being was measured using an instrument validated by Daniels (2000), who proposed a construct of affective well-being at work comprising five bipolar dimensions: anxiety-comfort, depression-pleasure, bored-enthusiastic, tiredness-vigour and angry-placid (30 items). Rego, Cunha and Neves (2016) presented a Portuguese version that was used in this study. The sample consists of 232 workers (n=232). It was used a non-probabilistic, convenience sampling.

Respondents are portuguese employees over the age of eighteen, who have at least one professional experience and no specific organisation or industry was targeted. Regarding gender, 66,4% are female, 33,6% are male. Regarding age, 50,9% are between 20 and 29 years old, 23,6% are between 30 and 39 years old and 16,4% are

between 40 and 49 years old. In relation to academic qualifications, 59% have a bachelor's degree. 64.7% have worked in the organisation for less than 5 years.

4. Results

After data collection, data were transferred to the IBM SPSS Statistics statistical program and variables were coded.

The three scales were initially subjected to an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), to verify if their factorial structure was consistent with that described in the literature. In the dark triad scale of personality traits (three dimensions) and abusive supervision (one dimension), this fact was verified, but in the psychological well-being scale only two dimensions were identified, one associated with positive emotions and the other associated with negative emotions, and the two were considered.

To test hypotheses, structural equation modeling, known as Partial Least Squares (PLS), was used. This model allows studying the relationship between dimensions or latent variables, which are measured indirectly using indicator variables, which in the present case are items from a questionnaire. PLS is suitable when the main objective is the prediction and explanation of endogenous latent variables, the sample may be small and the data may not follow a normal distribution. PLS is generally described as a technique free from distributional assumptions (Lohmöller, 1989; Ringle, Wende and Will, 2010).

In the measurement submodel, all variance inflated factor (VIF) values were below five, except three that were below six, meaning that no multicollinearity problems were detected. All loading values were greater than ,708, except five that presented values greater than ,636 and one with a value of ,511, supporting the convergent validity of the model. All indicators correlated less with dimensions other than the one they measure, except for a cross loading. These values support the discriminant validity of the model.

Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) are represented in Table 1. These values show very good reliability and support the unidimensionality and convergent validity of the model.

Table 1: Alpha de Cronbach, Composite Reliability and AVE

	Alpha de Cronbach	Composite reliability	AVE
Abusive Supervision	,966	,970	,682
Machiavellianism	,850	,899	,693
Psychopathy	,916	,941	,799
Narcissism	,920	,944	,808
Negative Affect	,945	,952	,571
Positive Affect	,956	,961	,637

The effect size indices f^2 show that the various exogenous variables have a weak to moderate role in the coefficient of determination (in the predictive capacity), highlighting the role of abusive supervision in increasing the worker's negative emotions (Table 2).

Table 2: Effect size f^2

Exogenous/Endogenous Variables	Abusive supervision	Negative Affect	Positive Affect
Gender	,019	,025	,041
Abusive supervision		,327	,113
Machiavellianism	,058	,012	,003
Narcissism	,004	,003	,001
Psychopathy	,068	,001	,031

By bootstrap resampling with 5000 subsamples randomly taken from the original sample with replacement, the significance of the two submodels was assessed. In the measurement submodel, all loadings presented a p-value lower than ,001. In the structural submodel, not all impact coefficients were significant. In Table 3, the significant paths for a significance level of ,05 are shown in bold. Thus, men feel more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions compared to women, despite perceiving greater abusive supervision. The supervisor's abusive behavior tends to increase negative emotions and reduce positive emotions, these associations being more significant and of greater intensity. In the associations between personality traits dark triad and supervisor abusive behavior, only the impacts of machiavellianism and psychopathy proved to be significant (the association is positive). The direct impact of supervisor psychopathy on reducing worker positive emotions was also found to be significant.

Table 3: Structural model coefficients and bootstrap estimates

	Coefficients	t	p-value (bootstrap)
Gender -> Abusive Supervision	,099	2,031	,042
Gender -> Negative Affect	-,112	2,531	,011
Gender -> Positive Affect	,164	3,263	,001
Abusive Supervision -> Negative Affect	,547	9,620	,000
Abusive Supervision -> Positive Affect	-,368	4,001	,000
Machiavellianism -> Abusive Supervision	,335	4,365	,000
Machiavellianism -> Negative Affect	,148	1,649	,099
Machiavellianism -> Positive Affect	-,090	,865	,387
Narcissism -> Abusive Supervision	,081	1,166	,244
Narcissism -> Negative Affect	,066	,850	,395
Narcissism -> Positive Affect	,043	,476	,634
Psychopathy -> Abusive Supervision	,321	4,172	,000
Psychopathy -> Negative Affect	,031	,352	,725
Psychopathy -> Positive Affect	-,244	2,535	,011

The graphic result of the PLS, with loadings values, coefficients of determination and the impact coefficients can be found in Figure 1. This figure is representative of the table above, as it explains all the relationships between the different variables in the present study.

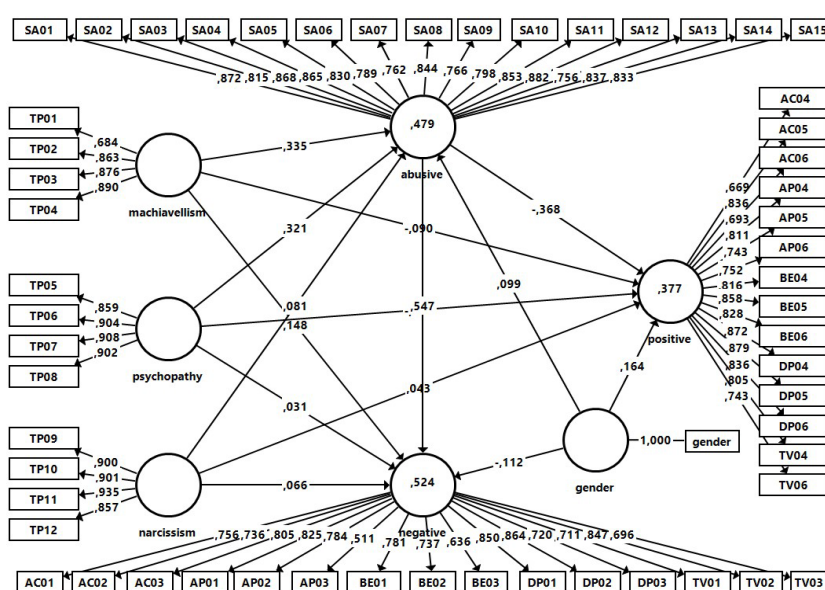


Figure 1: PLS algorithm results

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Hypothesis 1 suggests that the dark triad contributes to the adoption of abusive supervision. The hypothesis was confirmed. According to Wisse and Sleebos (2016), supervisors who have the dark triad personality traits adopt abusive behaviors at work. Jones and Figueredo (2013) considered that the personality traits that cause more harm to others are machiavellianism and psychopathy. Dark triad personality traits also represent an increase in counterproductive behaviors, deteriorating a healthy work environment (Spain, Harms and LeBreton, 2014). Supervisors who display dark triad personality traits are more likely to engage in complex and dangerous interpersonal strategies, which in turn causes negative effects on the individual (Paulhus and Williams, 2002).

Hypothesis 1.1 states that the supervisor's perceived psychopathy affects the adoption of abusive supervision. This hypothesis was supported. Psychopathy is a destructive personality trait and according to Mathieu et al (2014), psychopathy is the personality trait that is considered the most toxic of the personality traits of the dark triad and the authors considered that psychopathic traits of supervisors cause psychological distress among subordinates, work-family conflict and decreased job satisfaction, also impacting the well-being and attitudes of subordinates in the workplace. Psychopathy is characterised by impulsivity, lack of guilt or remorse on the part of the supervisor when causing harm to others, as well as insensitivity and emotional coldness. Lack of empathy and low affectivity means that psychopaths are less likely to care about others and according to Spain, Harms and LeBreton (2014), psychopaths are characterised by disrespect for the truth and failure to conform to norms social established. Mathieu et al (2014) and Paulhaus and Williams (2002) showed that psychopathic individuals

are manipulative, unethical, insensitive, intimidating, aggressive, unfocused and untrustworthy. The deceit, inability to accept guilt, unpredictability and impulsiveness of psychopaths culminate in difficulty in creating teams and establishing healthy relationships with subordinates. Traits of psychopathy encompass superficiality and disinterest in people, which results in a lack of remorse when supervisors with this trait harm subordinates. Therefore, psychopathy is associated with the adoption of selfish behaviors and abusive management practices (Tahir and Hussain, 2020).

Hypothesis 1.2 defines that the supervisor's perceived narcissism positively influences the adoption of abusive supervision. This hypothesis was not supported. Although narcissism is one of the characteristics present in the dark triad and some authors consider that narcissism is related to negative aspects regarding supervision at work, this does not always happen. Other authors have studied the positive side of the dark triad and some have concluded that the negative aspects of narcissistic individuals can go unnoticed (Judge, Piccolo and Kosalka, 2009). According to Caniëls and Hatak (2022), narcissism is associated with a high sense of self-importance, demand for excessive admiration and a preoccupation with fantasies related to success. However, narcissists are willing to deal with setbacks at work and when they see that this effort is rewarded, they are able to adapt and thrive in changing situations.

Hypothesis 1.3 highlights that machiavellianism influences abusive supervision. This hypothesis was supported. Machiavellian people show a greater tendency to be perceived as abusive by their subordinates (Jonason et al, 2014; Wisse and Sleebos, 2016). According to Judge, Piccolo and Kosalka (2009), machiavellians are people who frequently abuse the power of their authority and display dominant behavior, do not follow ethical and moral standards and aim to maximise their personal power. Individuals with machiavellian characteristics act abusively in leadership situations, leading to a decrease in the motivation and satisfaction of their subordinates.

Hypothesis 2 states that abusive supervision negatively influences the development of subordinates' psychological well-being at work, with a supervisor who is perceived as abusive contributing to low levels of subordinates' psychological well-being at work. The hypothesis was supported.

Regarding the psychological well-being scale, five bipolar dimensions were initially planned (Daniels, 2000), however, through the exploratory analysis it was only possible to find two dimensions, which are positive emotions and negative emotions. The fact that only two dimensions were found confirms what Warr (1990) stated about psychological well-being being related to affective well-being which, in turn, is characterised by a greater frequency of positive emotions and a lower frequency of negative emotions.

From the point of view of Spector, Fox and Domagalski (2006), negative emotion is related to hostility, anger and shame and is triggered by environmental conditions and stress factors. Aggression in organisations is triggered by negative affect and leads to situations of helplessness, revenge and negative thoughts. Working conditions and environments are evaluated by subordinates and when environments are perceived as stressful they induce negative emotions, including anger, anxiety and depression. On the contrary, when organisations provide meaning for employees, they tend to be happier and healthier, and are also more productive in the long term, which contributes to individual and organisational success. Positive emotions allow people to face adverse situations more positively, becoming more resilient people who are more willing to develop healthy relationships and develop gratitude (Rego and Cunha, 2008).

Hypothesis 2.1 states that abusive supervision positively influences negative affect and, consequently, leads to low levels of subordinates' psychological well-being at work. Hypothesis 2.2 predicted that abusive supervision is negatively related to positive affect and, consequently, to high levels of subordinates' psychological well-being. These hypotheses were supported. Tepper (2007) considered that abusive supervision is often associated with high levels of psychological suffering among subordinates, which, in turn, trigger states of anxiety, exhaustion, depression, and tension at work, related to negative emotions. Exposure to abusive supervision causes psychological suffering and involves dysfunctional thoughts and emotions in subordinates, culminating in their emotional exhaustion (Tepper, 2007). When individuals are exposed to intensely stressful situations, they end up showing emotional numbness and decreased job performance, with high levels of exhaustion being associated with low levels of well-being (Cropanzano and Wright, 2001).

Tepper, Simon and Park (2017) reported that exposure to abusive supervision causes states of aggression, exhaustion, learning difficulties and difficulty in establishing social exchanges in subordinates, weakening affective behavior and contributing, once again, to the reduction of subordinates' psychological well-being.

Although no hypotheses were developed, the results allowed us to conclude that women feel more negative emotions than men and that men feel more positive emotions than women. Women feel more negative

emotions than men, however, men reveal a greater perception of abusive supervision. The fact that men show fewer negative emotions may be related to the strategies adopted to deal with the abusive supervision they receive, that is, subordinates who use regulatory maintenance strategies may not be aware that these abusive attitudes are producing damage to their long-term psychological well-being (Tepper, 2007). This conclusion may also be related to some gender representations that view the expression of extreme positive or negative emotions by men in a negative light.

From a practical point of view, it is desirable that human resource managers evaluate the personality characteristics of supervisors, choosing not to select supervisors who present high levels of machiavellianism and psychopathy.

It is considered that this study contributed to analysing the impact that the adoption of abusive supervision has on the psychological well-being of employees and highlights the role of the supervisor's personality traits, which predict the adoption of unethical and destructive leadership styles for companies.

Throughout this research, some limitations were found, such as the fact that both personality traits and abusive supervision are studied based on the perceptions of subordinates. Another limitation of this study is related to the fact that it was not possible to carry out dyads supervisors-subordinates, that is, the supervisor himself would answer the questionnaire to questions about personality traits and the subordinate would answer the questions that correspond to abusive supervision and psychological well being.

Tepper (2007) mentioned that abusive supervision corresponds to the subjective evaluation made by subordinates, an evaluation that may be conditioned by the personality characteristics of the subordinate. It would be interesting for future research to understand the impact that subordinates' personality traits have on the perception that they are being abused by their supervisors. As Fischer et al (2021) suggest, it is important to rethink the abusive supervision concept as "experience of supervisor abuse".

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