

# **ABUSIVE LEADERSHIP, DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE, AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE: PERSPECTIVES FROM SALESPEOPLE & MANAGERS**

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## **INTRODUCTION & ORIENTATION**

It is estimated that 20 million Americans endure abusive working conditions every day (Futtermann 2004). Tepper (2000, p. 178) describes such abuse as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact.” These actions are deemed to be unfriendly, antagonistic, intimidating, and upsetting (Starratt and Grandy 2009). They may include the “silent treatment,” asking employees to work at unrelated or repulsive tasks, threatening workers with possible job loss, crossing the line between personal and professional department, public humiliation in front of peers, and speaking ill of subordinates behind their backs (Starratt and Grandy 2009; Ayree, Chen, Sun, and Debrah 2007). This description shows that workers may face a continuous barrage of assault that is maintained until relationships end or abusers voluntarily or involuntarily change their actions.

Gabler, Nagy, and Hill (2014) took a step toward understanding how abuse in a sales force has negative effects on salespeople as well as sales managers. Placing abusive leadership as the central construct in an organizational model, the authors first identified five antecedents that directly impacted likelihood that a sales manager would exhibit such behavior. They found that abuse by sales managers resulted in lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment for salespeople as well as sales managers.

We extend their research by focusing on how abusive sales leadership can negatively shape general perceptions of workplace fairness. We use data from salespeople and sales managers to confirm that supervisor authoritarianism impacts managerial abuse. Then, we look at the consequences of that abuse on perceptions of distributive justice. The role of normative commitment is presented as a moderator of the abuse-perceived justice relationship. We predict that if salespeople or sales managers are committed to their companies out of some form of obligation, abuse will have a lesser effect on perceptions of distributive justice for both parties. We then examine effects that justice perceptions have on life satisfaction, moving beyond Gabler et al. (2014) to examine the broader influence of abusive leadership.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

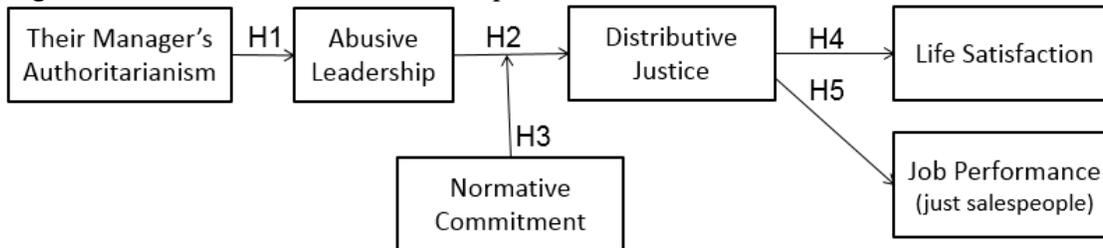
Data was collected using an online survey provider. After pretesting and attention filters, our final sample consisted of 122 salespeople and 120 sales managers with an even spread across demographics, experience, and industry. Structural Equation Modeling (specifically Latent Moderated Structural) modeling was implemented after the measurement model was specified.

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

The hypothesized model can be seen in Figure 1. The model was tested twice; first with the sample of salespeople and second with that of sales managers. Each hypothesis was also tested twice, except for

H5, which was only tested among salespeople. We found support for each hypothesis. Specifically, Authoritarianism is positively related to Abusive Supervision and Abusive Supervision is negatively related to Distributive Justice. Next, we test how the addition of Normative Commitment as a moderator negatively influences the relationship tested in Hypothesis 2. The interaction between Abusive Supervision and Normative Commitment was a significant predictor of Distributive Justice. Regarding outcomes, Distributive Justice was positively related to Life Satisfaction as well as Job Performance.

Figure 1. Model of Abusive Leadership to Justice and Outcomes



We plot the interaction between Abusive Leadership and Normative Commitment in figures 2 and 3 using a procedure developed by Aiken and West (1991). When a sales manager or salesperson has a strong sense of normative commitment, Abusive Supervision has less of an impact on their perception of distributive justice. For salespeople, a strong Normative Commitment cannot overcome an abusive supervisor as the relationship to Distributive Justice is negative in both cases, but suppressed when the commitment is high. Amazingly, for sales managers, when normative commitment is high, the relationship between abusive supervision and Distributive Justice is actually positive, meaning that when a sales manager feels obligated to a firm out of some ethical or moral rationale, their abuse can lead them to think they are creating a more just work place for employees.

Figure 2. Salesperson Interaction

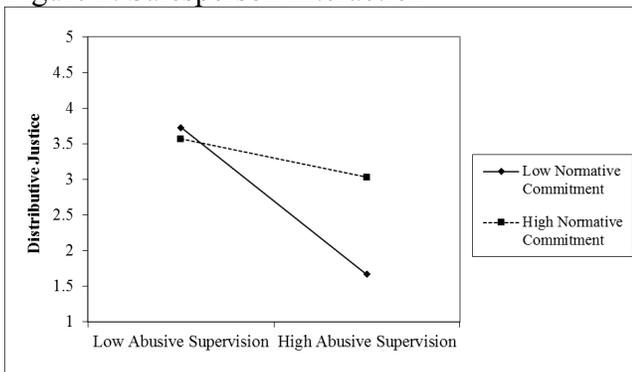
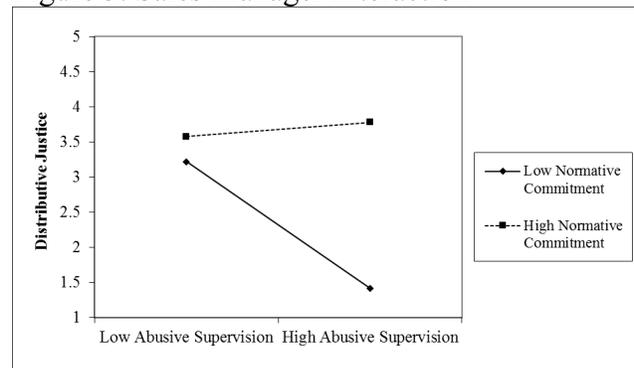


Figure 3. Sales Manager Interaction



Our model indicates that sales managers who have experienced authoritative leadership will become abusive leaders themselves. Further, when the manager-employee relationship is abusive, both salespeople and sales managers perceive the workplace to be unfair. Interestingly, this can be mitigated if either party feels an obligation or loyalty to the organization, in which case their commitment may trump the injustice. This sense of justice can have direct effects on two types of outcomes. First, both managers and salespeople experience less-satisfying lives when the work atmosphere is perceived as unjust. But importantly for managerially, an abuse-driven, unfair work environment actually hinder a salesperson's ability to sell as seen through a decreased job performance.

**References available upon request.**