

Trapped at Work:

The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision

Kimberley Breevaart¹, Barbara M. Wisse^{2,3}, & Birgit Schyns⁴

¹ Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

breevaart@essb.eur.nl

² University of Groningen, The Netherlands,

³ Durham University Business School, United Kingdom

b.m.wisse@rug.nl

⁴ NEOMA Business School, France

birgit.schyns@neoma-bs.fr

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Abstract

While research on abusive supervision is thriving, we still know very little about the sustained nature of the phenomenon. The scant papers focusing on the prolonged character of the detrimental relational dynamic take a within-dyad perspective, largely ignoring within-person, group or other external influences. Addressing these gaps in the literature, we introduce the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision. This model posits a hierarchically organized set of obstacles that make it difficult for followers to escape the abusive supervisor, explaining why abuse can continue over long periods of time. Specifically, we present an onion-shaped model in which the follower has a central position with each subsequent layer representing a more external cluster of barriers to leaving the abusive supervisor. Ranging from external to internal, these layers are: Barriers in the larger societal context (Layer 1; e.g., ambiguous laws), barriers in the organizational context (Layer 2; e.g., unclear policies), barriers due to the abusive supervisor (Layer 3; e.g., isolating followers), and barriers within the abused follower (Layer 4; e.g., implicit leadership theories). We hope that our model inspires future research on the sustained nature of abusive supervision and provides practitioners with the necessary background information to help abused followers escape their supervisors.

Keywords: abusive supervision; barriers model of abusive supervision; followership; leadership; sustained abuse

Trapped in an Abusive Supervisory Relationship:

The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision

Abusers often resort to psychological abuse to control their victims (e.g., Bancroft, 2002; Carden, 1994). For example, research on domestic violence and elderly abuse shows that abusers may threaten to reveal private information, humiliate their victims, and isolate them from important others. Such tactics are not only employed in the privacy of people's homes, but also in the work context where supervisors may resort to the abuse of followers. That is, abusive supervisors recurrently display verbal and non-verbal hostile behaviors vis-à-vis their subordinates (Tepper, 2000). However, while society has become more aware of psychological abuse in intimate or family relationships and is more willing to actively work towards diminishing its occurrence (e.g., by adopting laws that make it illegal or by calling the police), many still tend to ignore or disregard psychological abuse in the work domain. People – perhaps unintentionally – sometimes trivialize the phenomenon, for instance by stating that only a limited number of followers suffer from abusive supervision, by assuming that abusive supervision is likely over-reported because followers perceive non-abusive behaviors as abusive, or by thinking that the victims probably deserve maltreatment (Chan & McAllister, 2014; Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; Schyns, Felfe, & Schilling, 2018). Yet, like battered women and maltreated elderly, followers greatly suffer from psychological abuse by their supervisor, with consequences ranging from increased levels of depression, emotional exhaustion and anxiety to insomnia, problem drinking, and reduced satisfaction with life (e.g., Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017). Moreover, given the sustained nature of the phenomenon, those exposed to an abusive supervisor often suffer over long periods of time (e.g., Lian, Brown,

Ferris, Liang, Keeping, & Morrison, 2014; Simon, Hurst, Kelley, Judge, & Chen, 2015), and in many instances the effects are carried over to the next employment (Vogel & Bolino, 2019).

Abused followers would often be better off if they were able to end the abusive relationship but doing so can be extremely difficult. Considering the far-reaching consequences of abusive supervision on follower's lives, it is imperative that we understand better what hinders them to leave this toxic relationship. The aim of the current paper is to provide a theoretical framework explaining the barriers that prevent followers from ending an abusive supervisory relationship. With this theoretical framework, we want to stimulate future empirical research on the sustained nature of abusive supervision. We use the original barriers model on domestic abuse (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997) as a source of inspiration and adapt it to the work context to introduce the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision. This adaptation is necessary because of the different contexts in which the behavior occurs (domestic vs. work domain). According to the core principles of ecological models (Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2015; Stokols, 1992), any behavioral model is most useful if (1) it focuses on the context in which a certain behavior exists (in this case the work context); (2) it takes into account that there are multiple levels of influence on people's behavior (in our case followers' decision to leave an abusive supervisor or not); (3) it acknowledges that the influences at different levels are not independent but interact to predict why followers do not leave; and finally (4) recognizes that multi-level interventions are best to create behavioral change. Accordingly, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision places the abused follower in the center of an onion-shaped model in which each layer represents broad categories or clusters of barriers that prevent followers from leaving their abusive supervisor (see Figure 1). With each layer being peeled of, the barriers become more internally focused. Starting from the outer layer, the layers are: Barriers in the larger societal context (Layer 1), barriers in

the organizational context (Layer 2), barriers due to the abusive supervisor (Layer 3), and barriers originating from within the abused follower (Layer 4). These layers are considered to interact to explain follower behavior.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision addresses three main problems in the literature. First, while we know quite a bit about the determinants of abusive supervision (see Mackey et al., 2017; Zhang & Bednall, 2016), very few attempts have been made to understand the *sustained nature* of the phenomenon (Tepper, 2000) and why followers do not simply leave the abuser. Second, the scant literature on the sustained nature of abusive supervision is limited in the sense that it mainly takes a within-relationship perspective (Chan & McAllister, 2014; Klaussner, 2014; May, Wesche, Heinitz, & Kerschreiter, 2014; Oh & Farh, 2017) rather than taking into account barriers from outside the relationship. Third, the literature on abusive supervision has been criticized for being phenomenon rather than theory driven (Oh & Farh, 2017; Tepper, 2007). With the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision, we offer a theoretical framework to explain why followers might be “trapped” in an abusive supervisory relationship by going beyond the dyadic leader-follower relationship and incorporate both internal and external barriers that followers face when dealing with supervisor abuse. With this model, we not only hope to guide future research in the domain, but also to foster scholarly and societal awareness of the complexity of abusive supervisory relationships. Our broad perspective may prevent victim blaming, foster a fuller understanding of abusive supervision, and help steer attempts to make policy changes inside and outside organizations (including multi-layer interventions) that help to prevent and solve the problem.

THE ENDURING ASPECT OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION

The definition of abusive supervision is quite similar to definitions of psychological abuse in other domains (e.g., Bancroft, 2002; Carden, 1994). Abusive supervision has been defined as the *sustained* display of hostile behaviors by the leader, both verbal and non-verbal, but excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). These behaviors include, but are not limited to, humiliating and manipulating followers, having anger outbursts, lying, ostracizing, and breaking promises. Tepper (2007) argues that singular abusive episodes (such as having a rare anger outburst after a particularly stressful day) would not be considered abusive supervision, unless hostile acts like these become a consistent part of the supervisor's behavioral repertoire. In addition, again similar to abuse targeted at partners, the elderly and children, abuse of followers is likely to endure until either the victim (i.e., follower) or the abuser (i.e., leader) ends the relationship, or the abuser is incentivized to change his or her behavior (Jezl, Molidor, & Wright, 1996).

There are a few notable theoretical papers on the sustained nature of abusive supervision. First, Klaussner (2014) introduced his dyadic process model, explaining how abusive supervision may result from an escalating spiral of accumulated perceptions of supervisor injustice and inadequate responses by followers (e.g., avoidance or revenge). In addition, May et al. (2014) proposed a theoretical framework to explain the prolonged nature of destructive leadership more generally. Specifically, they argue that destructive leaders are unlikely to reduce – and may even further increase – their destructive behavior when they perceive their followers' coping efforts as either aggressive or submissive. Chan and McAllister (2014) proposed a reciprocal model in which abusive supervision triggers state paranoia in followers (i.e., increased anxiety, distrust, hypervigilance, and rumination). The submissive and provocative responses that follow from this paranoia consequently result in more abusive supervisor behaviors. Finally, Oh and Farh's

(2017) appraisal-emotion-behavior process model explains how followers' behavioral responses to abusive supervision change as the abuse continues. Specifically, they argue that at first, abusive supervision provokes anger and fear, but over time when followers keep getting confronted with abusive supervision, followers' emotions flatten out and eventually they end up feeling sad and helpless, which can explain why followers do not end the abusive relationship.

While these papers focus on why abusive supervision continues, their focus is essentially on the dynamics of the abusive relationship itself (i.e., a within-dyad perspective). The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision adds to these existing theoretical frameworks on abusive supervision in two fundamental ways. First, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision specifically addresses the issue of why followers do not end the abusive relationship. This issue is not the key focus in any of the other papers. Indeed, their focus is on explaining the dynamics of the abuse itself, not on explaining the inability to stop the abuse. While Oh and Farh (2017) acknowledge turnover as a possible outcome of fear of the abusive supervisor, Klaussner (2014) as well as May and colleagues (2014), explicitly exclude this "exit" option from their models, because they focus on how abusive supervision evolves within dyadic leader-follower relationships. Second, we go beyond the dyadic leader-follower relationship to explain why followers do not end the abusive relationship or are not able to end the abuse in the relationship. That is, we focus on a broad range of factors, internal as well as external to the dyadic context (e.g., followers' personality, supervisor's need for control, group norms, organizational policies, and societal culture), that explain why followers are unable to change their situation. This focus will hopefully provide a fuller understanding of the systemic nature of abusive supervision and at the same time prevent victim blaming. In the following, we elaborate on the barriers model of

domestic abuse, apply it to the work context and then zoom in on each of the four layers of barriers.

THE BARRIERS MODEL OF DOMESTIC ABUSE APPLIED TO ABUSIVE SUPERVISION

Domestic Abuse

The barriers model of domestic abuse outlines the various barriers that victims of domestic violence face that keep them from escaping the abusive relationship (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997). The model was developed by scientist-practitioners with many years of experience as therapists working with victims of domestic abuse with the intention to help therapists improve the effectiveness of interventions and to get battered woman to safety. In this model, the battered woman is at the center of an onion-shaped model consisting of different layers. Each of these layers present a category of barriers that the victim must overcome in order to escape the abuse. Ranging from external to internal barriers, these are: Barriers in the environment (Layer 1), barriers due to family, socialization, and role expectations (Layer 2), barriers resulting from the psychological consequences of abuse (Layer 3) and finally, barriers from childhood abuse and neglect issues (Layer 4). The layers are not mutually exclusive; in fact, victims may face barriers in all the layers or in a combination of them. Moreover, the layers may be interconnected.

Abusive Supervision

We used the original barriers model of domestic abuse as a source of inspiration to review relevant theory to delineate barriers relevant to abusive supervisory relationships and consequently, introduce the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision. We adopt from the original barriers model the notion that the victim (i.e., the abused follower) can be placed in the inner

circle of an onion-shaped model (see Figure 1) surrounded by different layers that represent broader categories of barriers to escaping the abusive supervisory relationship. Yet, we made several adaptations to the original model to account for the context in which the abuse takes place (Stokels, 1992). First, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision focuses on workplace rather than intimate relationships. We therefore added a separate layer of barriers in the organizational context and separated it from barriers in the larger societal context. Moreover, we added, deleted, or adapted some of the original barriers within all layers (because they were not, only or differently applicable to the work domain). In due course, we discuss barriers that are relevant to abuse in the work domain based on theory and research from management and organizational psychology. Second, while the barriers model on domestic abuse focuses on both psychological and physical abuse, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision focuses solely on barriers related to psychological abuse. Although many of the barriers probably would also apply to physical abuse at the workplace, the concept of abusive supervision explicitly excludes physical abuse (Tepper, 2000). Finally, while domestic abuse mainly takes place in the intimacy of a person's home, abusive supervision takes place in the work domain. As such it is more public than domestic abuse and therefore different people can potentially be involved in overcoming supervisory abuse, opening the door to making policy recommendation.

Notably, we do not claim that our list of barriers within each of the layers is exhaustive. It may be that (in some countries, situations, or points in time) additional barriers could be identified. We do, however, argue that the model may present a good starting point for further exploration. Below, we will describe these barriers in more detail, starting with the barriers in the larger societal context (Layer 1), discussing more inner layers one by one and ending finally with the barriers within the abused follower (Layer 4).

Layer 1: Barriers in the Larger Social Context

The barriers in the larger social context explain why it can be difficult for victims to access necessary resources and overcome obstacles in the society to end the abusive supervisory relationship. As we shall explain in the below, this layer contains barriers relating to an unsupportive societal culture, a lack of available job opportunities, and missing or unenforced legislation.

Societal Culture. The likelihood that unfair treatment of group members is deemed acceptable and inevitable is stronger in some cultures than in others. The concept of *power distance* is of particular interest here. Power distance reflects the degree to which individuals accept power inequality in a society (Hofstede, 1997). In some cultures (e.g., China), such inequality is deemed more acceptable and inevitable than in others (e.g., The Netherlands). The stronger the power distance in a particular culture, the more likely that authority figures expect and demand obedience and that the less powerful are inclined to have an unquestioning and submissive attitude towards those in power (Graham, Dust, & Ziegert, 2018). Abusive supervision is therefore more prevalent, less revolted against, and more enduring in high power distance cultures (see e.g., Wang, Mao, Wu, & Liu, 2012). Consequently, victims of abusive supervision may have more difficulty escaping the relationship when they are members of a high power distance culture. Notably, even within societies, power distance can differ between individuals and groups (see Clugston, Howell, & Dorfman, 2000), making it more difficult for some individuals to leave abusive relationships than for others.

A related barrier preventing victims of abusive supervision to escape is formed by the phenomenon that people are inclined to defend the system in which they function as legitimate and fair. Indeed, *system justification* theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) posits that people tend to

justify the way things are “so that existing social arrangements are perceived as fair and legitimate, perhaps even natural and inevitable” (Jost & Hunyady, 2002, p. 119), even when they are not. As such, system justification provides an explanation for how societal inequality persists and how the unfair treatment (such as abusive supervision) of victims is legitimized and sustained. One way in which people rationalize the status quo is through the use of stereotypes. Often, victims are seen in a negative light and derogated (e.g., overweight people are lazy; losers are weak; rape victims ‘asked for it’; see Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). Victims of abusive supervision may face similar stereotyping. Interestingly, such stereotypes are held both by the advantaged *and* the disadvantaged (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). This means that observers often blame the victim and victims blame themselves, which strengthens the belief that a change of workplace would not be a solution. As such, system justification tendencies may form a barrier to escape abusive supervision for victims.

Another important sub-barrier to escaping abusive supervision may be set by the *societal awareness* of the problem. As an example, the #metoo movement greatly increased awareness of the prevalence and pernicious impact of sexual violence. Consequently, people felt more supported to speak up, laws aimed at protecting victims were expanded, nondisclosure agreements were banned, money was raised to support people in their fights for justice, etc. Unfortunately, such awareness is currently lacking for psychological abuse in the workplace. This may not only limit the development of policies and opportunities aiding victims in their struggle to free themselves of abusive supervision, but it may also result in the larger population not understanding the issue and not being supportive of victims. Moreover, the victim may feel that (s)he is different from other people and that their case is an isolated occurrence. Unfortunately, social awareness is often created *after* things go horribly wrong. A case in point is

the abuse that took place at the France Télécom. In an attempt to cut costs and to slim down, managers engaged in systematic psychological abuse against staff. This even led to 35 employees committing suicide between 2008 and 2009. When the public became aware of this issue, societal support for victims became more organized and those held responsible were given prison sentences and fines for “institutional harassment” and creating a culture of routine workplace bullying (Chrisafis, 2019).

The Economy and the Job Market. When the economy is doing badly and the job market is tight or there are simply no jobs available in their occupational field, a practical reason for targets of abuse to stay in the relationship may be the lack of alternative options of employment. Indeed, people are dependent on their income to feed their family and pay the rent/mortgage as well as other costs of living. As such, targets' *continuance commitment*, denoting the perceived costs associated with leaving the organization (for lack of alternatives or investments made; see Meyer & Allen, 1991), may explain employees' decision to remain in the same job while being dissatisfied with it (Huysse-Gaytandjieva, Groot, & Pavlova, 2013). Notably, this barrier to escaping an abusive supervisory relationship may be stronger for female employees because they often see less options for alternative employment (see Wahn, 1998) and feel that they made more investments (Vandenberghe & Panaccio, 2012). Moreover, this barrier may also be stronger for employees working in some sectors rather than in others (e.g., the oil industry versus IT).

The Law. Many countries now have legislation stipulating that workplace harassment, bullying, or violence (which would normally also include abusive supervision) is not acceptable and should be prosecuted. Specific legal prohibitions against workplace bullying exist in, for instance, France, Belgium, South Australia, and Sweden (Lippel, 2011), and recently also have

been introduced in Japan (Webster & Rosseau, 2020). Notably, some laws (like those in Japan) are extremely vague in stipulating punishments for harassers, leaving it up to companies to decide if and what action should be taken. In other countries laws are lacking. For instance, in the US, to date, there is no federal law that would make all forms of workplace bullying illegal. There are federal laws in the US that protect employees from being mistreated based on gender, race, age, national origin, or disability; but none that protect an employee from mistreatment that is not based on a protected characteristic. In some countries, the situation is even more dire. For instance, in Saudi Arabia immigrant workers (many being domestic workers) are excluded from labor laws (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Employers of domestic workers often face no punishment for serious abuse (including unpaid wages, confiscation of passport, forced confinement, and physical and sexual violence), while domestic workers have been put into prison or even receive lashings for charges such as "witchcraft". Clearly, lacking the back up from a (unambiguous) law poses a substantial barrier that prevents victims of supervisor abuse from leaving.

Layer 2: Barriers in the Organizational Context

In working through the different layers, abused employees may also face a variety of barriers in the organizational context that make it difficult for them to end the abuse. For instance, organizational norms may foster sustained abuse, organizational policies may be unclear or unsupportive, and solidarity to co-workers may hinder targets from escaping the abuse.

Organizational Norms and Values. Some stumbling blocks for those seeking to change an abusive relationship are grounded in organizational norms and values. For instance, recent research suggests that both aggressive organizational norms and hostile organizational climates

may lead employees to perceive aggressive behavior to be acceptable, thereby increasing the likelihood of abusive supervision (see Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011; Zhang & Bednall, 2016). At some point, organizations (or teams within them) may even develop an abusive supervision climate (Priesemuth, Schminke, Ambrose, & Folger, 2014). Notably, some types of organizations are more accepting of abuse than others, like those that are more bureaucratic, political, or masculine in nature and victims working in such areas may find it more difficult to escape an abusive relationship with their supervisor than others (see Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007; Zapf, Escartin, Scheppa-Lahyani, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2020).

Employees who are members of a union may find support when in a precarious interaction pattern with their supervisor. However, not all organizations are as positively inclined towards union organization (see Cardador, Grant, Lamare, & Northcraft, 2017), which may pose a barrier for employees to become a member and get support in dealing with an abusive supervisory relationship. Finally, organizational norms may stipulate that “if two are fighting, two are to blame”. Battered employees may be forced to go into sessions with the abuser by a mediator or HR-specialist, where they are pressured to make disclosures about the abuse and face the consequences later.

Corporate Social Responsibility. Research shows that organization’s corporate social responsibility such as its involvement in the community and pro-environmental practices is an important reason why people are willing to work for an organization (e.g., Jones, Willness, & Madey, 2014). Yet, the general attractiveness of an organization may also become a barrier from leaving when faced with an abusive supervisor. Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that employees might tolerate worse job conditions in organizations that score higher in corporate

social responsibility. For example, information about an organization's social responsibility reduces people's wage requirements (Burbano, 2016) and increases people's willingness to accept lower wages (Frank & Smith, 2014). Additionally, this barrier may be especially salient for older rather than younger employees, as corporate social responsibility practices more strongly address the emotional needs and goals that are prioritized when people's future time perspective decreases (Wisse, van Eijbergen, Rietzschel, & Scheibe, 2018).

The barrier may be stronger in prosocial occupations (such as nursing, teaching, and zoo-keeping) as well. People working in prosocial occupations are more likely to consider their work a calling, meaning that they are attracted to work that is personally, morally and socially relevant (Wrzesniewski, 2012). People who are called have a great sense of purpose (Hall & Chandler, 2005) and duty (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) and may sacrifice their own well-being for the cause (Serow, 1994). This makes it more likely that employees in prosocial occupations will "take one for the team" when confronted with an abusive supervisor so that they can continue the work they deem so important.

Organizational Policies and Practices. Organizational policies may also hinder the abused follower from taking action. For example, some organizations simply do not have relevant policies, in others such policies are unclear, or not geared at protecting the less powerful. Moreover, should victims alert the organization (e.g., by filing a complaint or notifying someone in HR) the outcome of such action is uncertain. Victims may fear that the abuser learns about their complaint and retaliates. Notably, this fear of retaliation, and the subsequent inertia of the target of abuse, is stronger the more power the abusive supervisor has or appears to have (Lian et al., 2014; Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Hu, & Hua, 2009). Research has suggested that a lack of clear rules that define what is (and is not) allowed may sustain the

mistreatment of others, because leaders and followers are not informed about which behavior is (not) tolerated (Cohen, 2016; Mulder, Jordan, & Rink, 2015). Research has shown that in organizations that fail to sanction bad behavior more abusive supervision is reported (Zhang & Bednall, 2016). Arguably in such organizations, abusers may feel that they can do how they please, and victims may feel that there is no support for them. It has been found that when employees hold their organization co-responsible for the abusive supervision to occur (for instance by not sanctioning bad behavior), they refrain from speaking up and from making suggestions (see Wang & Jiang, 2015), which is indicative of a perceived barrier. Consequently, it seems that victims of abusive supervision are often unable to rely on their organization to help them end the abuse (see Courtright, Gardner, Smith, McCormick, & Colbert, 2016).

Team Solidarity and Support. Sharing negative experiences can form the basis of the development of strong team cohesion. Indeed, it has been found that shared traumatic experiences (like abuse) often lead to increased solidarity and cooperation amongst team members (e.g., Drabek, 1986; Quarantelli & Dynes, 1977; Sweet, 1998). In a similar vein, literature on the social sharing of affect suggests that talking about negative events with others, does not necessarily contribute to emotional recovery, but it does strengthen interpersonal relationships and social integration (Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001). Likewise, Heider's (1958) balance theory would predict good relationships between followers who agree that they have a bad relationship with their boss (see Schyns, 2006, for an LMX example). Indeed, sharing a negative—as compared to a positive—attitude about a third party is particularly effective in promoting closeness between people (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann Jr, 2006). As such, strong team level bonds may develop between employees that share abusive experiences and a dislike for the abuse boss. These strong team level ties may make it harder for individual

employees to leave the abusive supervisor, not only because they do not want to lose the support of their colleagues, but also because they do not want to deprive colleagues from the support they might give to them. Social support from co-workers might also affect staying with an abusive supervisor via a different process. That is, based on the cross-domain buffering hypothesis (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), support from one source (e.g., a co-worker) can reduce the impact of social undermining from another source (e.g., the supervisor). Thus, support from co-workers can reduce employees' intention to leave the organization even when feeling emotionally exhausted because of abusive supervision (e.g., Ducharme, Knudsen, & Roman, 2007).

Layer 3: Barriers due to the Abusive Supervisor

Within the dyadic leader-follower relationship, followers are likely to experience a variety of barriers to escape the abuse that are due to actions of the abusive supervisor. For example, the negative impact of abusive supervision on followers' psychological, physical, and emotional resource pools as well as the coping mechanisms resulting from the impact of abusive supervision may reduce followers' ability and/or willingness to end the abuse. Abusive supervisors may also actively prevent followers from ending the abusive supervisory relationship because of their need for control.

Preventing Employees from Leaving. Abusive supervisors may play an active role in making sure the target cannot end the relationship and escape the abuse. Scandura (1998), focusing on dysfunctional mentoring relationships, argues that maintenance of these relationships is sometimes sought by mentors because it feeds mentors' need for control. In a similar vein, it has been argued that so called corporate psychopaths (organizational members scoring high on psychopathy and who are in leadership positions) enjoy the process of inflicting

pain on others and may therefore not be willing to let their target go (see Boddy, 2011). As such, abusive supervisors may hinder employees' attempts to leave the relationship and find another job (e.g., by not providing a letter of reference or by talking negatively about the victim to potential employers).

Social Isolation. Relatedly, a tactic that perpetrators of psychological abuse often use to control their victims is to cut them off from others from within the organization. This may make it extra difficult to find help (from HR-advisors, confidential counselors, etc.) to end the abuse. Indeed, dissent, disclosure and critical inquiries may not be tolerated by abusers, as they seek to protect their own agenda from discovery and want to maintain their reputation in the organization (Boddy, 2017). Abusive leaders may use their relative expansive network within the organization (Carter, DeChurch, Braun, & Contractor, 2015) to strengthen their own position and weaken that of their victims, or they may try to dictate with whom their abused followers are allowed to talk (Bancroft, 2002; Grigsby & Hartman, 1997; Tepper, 2000). By physically and socially separating the target of the abuse from others, victims start to become socially isolated. This limits their access to information about the dynamics of abuse (e.g., are others facing similar problems with the supervisor?, did this happen before to other employees?), about how to get help and about the options for a separation from the abusive supervisor. As a result, the abusive supervisor may become a central source of information. The abuser's messages such as "no one will believe you", "they will see you as a nuisance", or "I am too important here to be fearful for my position", may be seen as reliable and factual. The social isolation and the dependence on the supervisor for information may be especially strong for followers working in a more advisory relationship (e.g., a mentor-mentee or master-apprentice kind of relationship), because in these relationship there are particularly strong dyadic ties and large power

differentials. Social isolation may also occur because the colleagues may decide that being associated with that person carries higher potential costs (such as becoming the target of abuse themselves), which impedes knowledge sharing (Neves, 2018) and increases dependency on (information provision by) the leader.

Impact of an Abusive Supervisor. Not only the abusive supervisor's actual behavior, but also ruminating about and anticipating the abuse may pose a barrier as they are stressors that drain employees' resources. Research has indeed shown that abusive supervisors reduce followers' psychological resources, as indicated by increased levels of exhaustion, anxiety, depression, reduced self-image and self-esteem, insomnia, and problematic drinking behaviors. Abusive supervision has additionally been associated with reduced physical resources and may foster for instance gastrointestinal issues and breathing difficulties (for overviews see e.g., Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper et al., 2017). Finally, abusive supervision also affects followers' emotional resource pools by eliciting negative emotions such as fear and sadness (Oh & Farh, 2017). Followers' drained resources may cause followers to be too depleted to take the actions that are required for stopping the abuse (e.g., look for other jobs, alerting HR, etc.).

One specific consequence of draining followers' psychological and emotional resource pools is that it may cause post-traumatic stress – that is, intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and hyperarousal – in followers (Vogel & Bolino, 2019). Generally, events that are experienced as extraordinary, uncontrollable, and overwhelming, may cause post-traumatic stress, and abusive supervision classifies as such an event. First, abusive supervision is extraordinary in the sense that it often violates norms for appropriate personal interactions at the workplace. Second, as most followers make external attributions for the cause of abusive supervision (Bowling & Michel, 2011; Burton, Taylor, & Barber, 2014), abusive supervision is generally considered to be

uncontrollable by the target. Finally, abusive supervision can be overwhelming, because it evokes strong emotional reactions (Oh & Farh, 2017) and because it shatters assumptions underlying the idea that “it can’t happen to me” and that the world is fair. Posttraumatic stress makes it increasingly difficult for followers to escape abuse because it negatively affects followers’ identity to the point where they come to see themselves as an everlasting victim (Vogel & Bolino, 2019). Additionally, those experiencing PTS often show a range of dysfunctional behaviors that can be detrimental to their support system.

Coping with an Abusive Supervisor. Because people generally try to protect their resources in the face of possible resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989; 2011), followers may use various coping mechanisms to protect themselves from their abusive supervisor. Yet, these coping mechanisms may actually pose a barrier to escaping the abuse. For example, emotion-focused coping mechanisms such as avoidance and withdrawal (Oh & Farh, 2017) are associated with a reduced action-tendency, which may include the tendency to end the abusive supervisory relationship. Additionally, rather than trying to escape the abuse, followers may try to do what their leader expects from them (i.e., compliance) in an attempt to please the abuser and cease further maltreatment. Indeed, performance-enhancing pathways of abusive supervision – caused by followers trying to show the supervisor wrong or trying to reduce future hostility – have been found (Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017; Melwani & Barsade, 2011). Similarly, Tröster and Van Quaquebeke (2020) showed that when followers blame themselves for the abuse, they feel guilty about risking this important social relationship, and engage in helping rather than escaping behaviors in an attempt to restore the relationship. This means that such followers make more investments in the relationship, making them less likely to (want to) leave, but also more likely to be drained further, which results in even less energy to leave.

Another way in which abused followers may cope with their supervisor is through sympathizing with the abuser, which is also known as the Stockholm Syndrome (Goddard & Tucci, 1991). The term Stockholm Syndrome was originally created to describe how a person who is taken hostage – unable to escape and isolated from others – sometimes bonds with his/her hostage-taker to survive. Since then, the term Stockholm Syndrome has also been used to describe responses to other abusive relationships (children who are abused by a family member; wives who are abused by their husband; Grigsby & Hartman, 1997; Jülich, 2005). Apart from the fact that victims with Stockholm Syndrome develop positive feelings toward the abuser, they may even help the abuser achieve his/her goals to increase their chances of survival. Yet, because they adopt their abuser's world view and justify the relationship that they are in, followers are unlikely to end the abusive relationship.

Relatedly, the barriers due to the abusive supervisor as described above concur with the five common features of brainwashing (Mega, Mega, Mega, & Harris, 2000). First, abusers isolate their victims from important others, resulting in the abuser being a major influence in the way victims think about themselves and their abuser. Second, the uncontrollability of the abuse leads to a state of learned helplessness through which victims lose their ability to critically evaluate their situation. Third and fourth, abusers change victims' self-image and self-worth through increasing feeling of shame and guilt. Finally, abusers evoke fear, which is said to be the most powerful feature of brainwashing, with victims being grateful when an anticipated abusive event did not happen. Brainwashing is common in battered women, members of cults, and hostages and seems to be an important feature of abusive supervisory relationships as well, leading victims to accept the situation as it is and may even lead victims to idealize their abuser

(Mega et al., 2000). Consequently, followers may lack a sense of urgency to escape the abusive supervisory relationship.

Layer 4: Barriers within the Abused Follower

In addition to more external barriers, individuals in abusive supervisory relationships may also face barriers based on their own values, beliefs, and expectations that developed as a result of socialization processes, identity development, role-modeling, etc. Additionally, dispositional traits (e.g., agreeableness) may pose a barrier to escape an abusive supervisor. We explain in more detail how these individual differences can impede individuals from leaving a situation in which they are abused by their supervisor.

Social Identification. A person's identity is co-defined by their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), including those at work (Ellemers, Haslam, Platow, & van Knippenberg, 2003). Social identities serve to make a person define who they are and to feel good about themselves and the groups they belong to (e.g., van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004). Indeed, when people spend a large part of their day at work, their job/profession is often an integral part of their identity (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Hogg & Terry, 2000). The more employees identify with their organization or work group, the stronger is their perception of oneness with or belongingness to that organization or team/work group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and importantly, the stronger their commitment and the lower their intention to leave (Riketta & van Dick, 2005; van Dick et al., 2004). However, identification is not necessarily always beneficial. Indeed, as Conroy, Henle, Shore and Stelman put it: "...individuals with high organizational identification may internalize organizational problems, tolerate abusive environments, and remain with the organization despite the emotional toll" (pp. 198; also see Decoster, Camps, Stouten, Vandevyvere, & Tripp, 2013). Thus, employees feel less inclined to

leave an abusive supervisor as they fear losing their sense of belonging to a group that they identify with (see Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008).

Conservation Values. The values people hold play an important role in the behaviors that people do (not) engage in. Values determine what people consider to be good/bad and justified/illegitimate and as such, may affect whether followers consider abusive supervision as “bad” and “illegitimate” and accordingly, whether they are motivated to change their situation. Schwartz’s (1992, 2012) theory of basic values distinguishes ten universal values, although (groups of) people may differ in the extent to which specific values are important to them. Of particular interest in the context of abusive supervision are so-called conservation values, consisting of conformity, security, and tradition, because these are self-protective values that stipulate how to deal with anxiety in uncertain situations and values that regulate behavior in social relationships. Followers with strong conservation values are motivated to adhere to social expectations from others (e.g., supervisor or colleagues). As such, they are likely to comply with their abusive leader’s expectations and may even do their best to restore the relationship (see Layer 3). Additionally, followers with strong conservation values are also more motivated to adhere to norms. Therefore, when abusive supervision constitutes the “norm” in organizations, these followers are more likely to act in accordance with these norms (by complying and accepting), making it less likely that they end the abusive supervisory relationship. Finally, conservation values may prevent followers from leaving an abusive supervisor because of their resistance to change and their preference for certainty (e.g., preferring the devil you know over the devil you don’t know).

Implicit Leadership Theories. Over their life and work experiences, people develop beliefs about a “typical” supervisor-follower relationship. So called implicit theories about

leadership (Eden & Leviatan, 1975) shape people's expectations about how leaders typically behave (Schyns & Schilling, 2011). These implicit leadership theories are already prevalent in children (Ayman-Nolley & Ayman, 2005), which may be due to early family experiences. That is, parents are early role models who shape children's expectations regarding "normal" leadership behavior (Keller, 1999). For example, children who have been the target of parental abuse are more tolerant of aggressive behavior from authority figures and often learn that being submissive is the best way to deal with aggression and that escape is impossible (Bandura, 1973). These children have learned from an early age that aggression constitutes "normal" leader-follower interactions and as such, do not consider the experience of abusive supervision to be something that can be or should be changed. Moreover, it has been suggested that when followers expect work relationships to be negative and for instance characterized by abusive supervision, and the leader meets those expectations, the follower does not query that something is amiss (see Uhl-Bien, 2005). This, in turn, may make it more likely that the follower continues the abusive relationship.

While a person's implicit leadership theories are relatively stable across job changes (e.g. Epitropaki & Martin, 2004), they can develop with experiences (e.g., Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tran-Quon, & Topakas, 2013; Foti, Hansbrough, Epitropaki, & Coyle, 2017). Thus, with the experience of abusive supervision, especially in case of prolonged abuse, an image of typical leaders as abusive can develop in employees. Once a person thinks of typical leaders that way, a change of job to leave an abusive supervisor or speaking up about the abuse might seem senseless as the employee does not expect another supervisor to be less abusive or the abusive supervisor to change. Additionally, Grandy and Starrat's (2010) research on young workers' sense-making of abusive supervision showed that when the experience of abuse contradicts

expectations, young workers try to make sense of it. Arguably, this is a coping mechanism that is also not geared at ending the abusive supervisory relationship but at being able to deal with the abuse while staying. At the same time, sense-making carries forward into the future and can be used, similar to implicit leadership theories, to normalize the experience of abuse and become a barrier to leaving.

Personality. Followers' personality traits may play an important role in how followers deal with an abusive supervisor and as such traits can pose a barrier. Personality traits can be seen as basic tendencies or general predispositions, largely controlled by biological influences (McCrae & Costa, 2008). As such, personality traits are relatively stable over time, differ across individuals, and are fairly consistent over situations (Anusic & Schimmack, 2016). Probably the most common framework of personality traits is the Big Five, which hosts five broad factors, namely Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Particularly agreeableness and conscientiousness may affect whether a follower is likely to end an abusive supervisory relationship or not. Agreeable followers may be less likely to leave their abusive supervisor because they value social relationships and tend to be forgiving (McCrae & John, 1992). As such, these followers may be more likely to trust that things will change for the better and forgive their leader, rather than changing the situation they are in. In addition, research shows that people scoring high on agreeableness and conscientiousness are more likely to conform to social norms (DeYoung, Peterson, & Higgins, 2002). As long as the social norm is to stay in an abusive supervisory relationship, it seems likely that agreeable and conscientious followers will adhere to that norm rather than ending the relationship with an abusive supervisor.

DISCUSSION

Followers of abusive supervisors are often subjected to psychological abuse for a long period of time (e.g., Lian, Brown, Ferris, Liang, Keeping, & Morrison, 2014; Simon, Hurst, Kelley, Judge, & Chen, 2015). We introduce the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision as a theoretical framework to better understand why followers do not end their suffering by leaving the abusive supervisor. Our model makes five significant theoretical contributions to the abusive supervision literature.

First, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision adds to the literature with its focus on the enduring aspect of abusive supervision. Although the sustained nature of abusive supervision is a key element of the phenomenon (Tepper, 2000), systematic empirical research on the topic is still in its infancy. Research that particularly focusses on explaining the duration of abusive relationships is uncommon; most studies focus either on the detrimental outcomes of abusive supervision (Schyns & Schilling, 2013) or its antecedents (Zhang & Bednall, 2015). The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision provides a framework for future research into the barriers that prevent followers to end the abusive supervisory relationship.

Second, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision goes beyond the dyadic leader-follower relationship to explain why abusive supervision endures. Specifically, our model provides a comprehensive understanding of the sustained nature of abusive supervision with its focus on a broad collection of factors (ranging from more external to more internal), that make it difficult for followers to leave. In doing so, the model acknowledges the complexity of abusive supervisory relationships, showing that followers may have to overcome a variety of barriers within the same and/or in multiple layers to escape the abuse. Adding to this complexity is that more external barriers are likely to have consequences for the more internal barriers (e.g., growing up in a patriarchal culture may affect the values and beliefs that children are taught by

their parents) and vice versa (e.g., agreeable followers may be more likely to adhere to organizational norms).

Third, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision points attention towards factors that have not received much research attention in relation to abusive supervision so far. For instance, it discusses the notion that societal culture, supervisor's need for control, and follower's beliefs about leader-follower relationships affect follower's interaction with an abusive supervisor. Additionally, researchers often consider the abusive supervisory relationship a given and study its dynamics. With our model, we ask for more scholarly attention on ending the abusive relationship and the barriers that make it difficult to do so. It also puts existing knowledge on abusive supervision in an overarching theoretical perspective. For example, while abusive supervision may have a host of different effects on followers, many of those effects are similar in that they may act as a barrier to escaping the abuse. As such, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision provides a fuller understanding of the dynamics of abusive supervision.

Fourth, we contribute to the literature on abusive supervision by stressing its problematic nature. Even though research convincingly shows the detrimental consequences to followers' well-being and functioning (e.g., Mackey et al., 2017), abusive supervision is sometimes trivialized, for example, because it seems to be a low base-rate phenomenon. However, even if the number of followers subjected to abusive supervision is low at any point in time, over their career span, many people encounter abusive supervisors. As outlined in our model, escaping the abuse is difficult, which means that those exposed to an abusive supervisor suffer greatly for long periods of time (e.g., Lian et al., 2014; Simon et al., 2015; Tepper et al., 2009). Vogel and Bolino (2019) even showed that in many instances the effects of abusive supervision are carried

over to the next employment. As such, it is key that we do not downplay the severity of abusive supervision and instead, try to better understand its pervasiveness.

Fifth, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision puts some of the research on abusive supervision into a different perspective. For example, it has been argued that followers sometimes perceive non-abusive behaviors as abusive (e.g., Chan & McAllister, 2014). Our model also points to the notion that followers may also perceive abusive behaviors as non-abusive, for example when they have developed implicit leadership theories that abuse constitutes “normal” leader-follower interactions. Additionally, performance-enhancing pathways of abusive supervision (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012; Tepper, 2007) may easily lead to the justification of abusive supervision as a strategic motivator (Tepper, Duffy, & Breaux-Soignet, 2012), which in itself can become a barrier to escaping the abuse. Our model shows that increased performance as a result of abusive supervision may be an attempt to escape further abuse (e.g., compliance) and may become a barrier to escaping the abuse because of the investment in the relationship and the drainage of energetic and emotional resources.

Policy and other Practical Implications

Our model may serve as a theoretical framework to develop interventions aimed at getting abused followers to safety. As for the barriers in Layer 1, one could argue that it is difficult to address problems related to the economy and the job market, but one powerful way to break down barriers may be through creating societal awareness (e.g., a movement such as #metoo). Global organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) may play an important role in increasing world-wide awareness of workplace abuse (e.g., supporting campaigns) and supporting national initiatives (e.g., providing information for policy building/changes) to help solve the problem. Currently, the WHO recognizes elder abuse as a

hidden health problem, but not workplace abuse. As we argued, psychological abuse of employees by their leader is a relatively unrecognized problem that deserves more attention. Additionally, another powerful way to protect employees against workplace abuse is by adopting appropriate laws. Whereas more and more countries have laws to protect followers from being exploited by their supervisor (Lippel, 2011), still many countries have no legislation at all (Human Rights Watch, 2008) or only have very vague laws (Webster & Rosseau, 2020). Changing these laws to properly protect employees requires collective action by the public (e.g., large-scale protests) or campaigning and bargaining by unions.

From our discussion of Layer 2 and 3, it becomes apparent that organizations play a crucial role in creating a support system for those who fall victim to abusive supervision and making sure that victims still have access to key resources (e.g., information, support from colleagues or a counselor). Yet, despite the importance of sound organizational policies it seems that victims of abusive supervision are often unable to rely on their organization to hold their leader accountable (see Courtright et al., 2016). Apart from having clear rules, organizations should punish rule violations, because it shows leaders that transgression of rules have negative consequences for them which can reduce abusive supervision (Johns, 1999; Zhang & Bednall, 2016). Making these interventions visible may also curb abusive behavior, because it diminishes the likelihood that employees will remain inactive when seeing or experiencing misconduct, and increase the likelihood that employees will confront the issue, report to higher management or engage in external whistleblowing (see Kaptein, 2011). Additionally, organizational practices focused on steering behavior and interpersonal conduct feed into perceptions of an ethical climate (that is, the shared perception that the organization's policies, practices and procedures strongly accentuate ethical principles; Kaptein, 2008; Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010).

Ethical climate not only mitigates abusive behavior, but may also reduce the likelihood that ‘rebellious’, complaining employees face retaliating tactics from a disgruntled supervisor (see Huang, Greenbaum, Bonner, & Wang, 2019), and increase the likelihood that colleagues stand up for the target of abuse (Priesemuth, 2013). Moreover, when organizational norms stipulate non-abusive supervisor behavior, those that identify highly may feel strengthened to end the abusive relationship as a way of asserting their group membership (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Victims of abusive supervision who are too depleted to seek help or to find a way out of the abusive supervisory relationship (Layer 3), can be supported by building up their energy and self-efficacy, through for example, training and development as well as work-related coaching and mentoring.

The barriers within the abused follower as discussed in Layer 4 are often deeply ingrained in the person. To the best of our knowledge, there is no research on how to change for example, implicit leadership theories. However, considering the development of implicit leadership theories, we can assume that they can change through longer exposure to positive leadership experiences. Breaking down barriers in the more outer layers of the model is especially important to, for example, highly agreeable followers and followers with conservation values. It is obvious that addressing one of the barriers in one of the layers, such as installing laws that make abusive supervision illegal, will not be sufficient to end abusive supervisory relationships. Because the layers are interconnected, it is important to address multiple external as well as internal barriers that abused followers face. For example, even in countries with adequate laws, these laws may not always be reinforced. Also, followers may be reluctant to speak up about the abuse due to, for example, a lack of organizational policies, implicit leadership theories that abuse constitutes “normal” work relationships and/or because they

simply do not have the energy to speak up. Notably, addressing barriers in these inner layers of the model may also give abused followers the confidence to address other more external barriers (e.g., abuse is not a normal part of workplace relationships and there should be organizational policies that help protect victims).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the original barriers model and the existing literature on abusive supervision, we outlined what we consider the most relevant barriers that abused followers encounter in each of the layers. However, this list of barriers within each of the layers is probably not exhaustive, and that was also not our aim. In fact, there may be more barriers that prevent abused followers from escaping the abusive supervisory relationship, and some of those barriers may only exist for some victims, in some organizations, or in some countries. Although it seems to make sense to focus on the most prevalent and relevant barriers first, in due time it may be useful to develop an even more comprehensive understanding of all barriers and their interrelatedness. That is, as we know more about why victims remain in an abusive relationship, our options for doing something about that may expand as well. We posit that we need research into how the various barriers affect the dynamics of abusive supervision. For example, are barriers relating to some layers more powerful than others or easier to change? It would also be interesting to examine interactions between the layers and the barriers within them. For example, are barriers stemming from within the abused follower harder to break when they coincide with barriers due to the abusive supervisor or the organizational context?

An interesting area for future research is how being abused affects followers in their next job. Although Tepper (2000) called for such research when introducing the concept, we are unaware of any empirical studies on this topic. Yet, it seems likely that even if followers escape

the abuse, the sustained exposure to abusive supervision creates a vulnerability for future abuse. For example, followers may develop implicit theories that abusive relationships at work are “normal” (see Layer 4) and/or develop post-traumatic stress (see Layer 3). Research on domestic and child abuse also shows that the negative effects of abuse often persist long after the abuse has ended (Moeller, Bachmann, & Moeller, 1993; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007). Interestingly, Vogel and Bolino (2019) argue that for some people, the experience of abusive supervision may actually reduce the likelihood of being victimized in the future. They argue that the traumatic experience may lead to a period of post-traumatic growth, enhancing followers’ self-esteem and creating a better sense of what they find important in life. More research is needed to better understand how the post-traumatic experience of abusive supervision affects followers’ future career.

Studying the barriers that prevent abused follower from leaving may not be easy. That is, given the barriers outlined in our model, followers may be reluctant to report abuse by their supervisor, for example out of fear for retaliation in the absence of organizational policies. In extreme cases, followers may not even be consciously aware of the abuse, for example when developing symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome. Therefore, it might be very difficult to access information about ongoing abusive supervisory relationships and the barriers for leaving as the follower might not feel safe to talk about the abuse or the questions might even increase the suffering. Another way to capture abusive supervision is to gather retrospective data, for instance by studying abusive supervision among those followers who already escaped their abusive supervisory relationship or ask followers to reflect on previous (and not their current) abusive supervisor experiences. For example, Liang, Hanig, Evans, Brown, and Lian (2018) asked employees to recall and visualize a workplace interaction in which they were treated abusively

by their supervisor. Learning from followers who escaped abusive supervisory relationships might also tell us more about how to break barriers. Of course, retrospective data suffer from various problems, such as misremembering events or putting a positive spin on one's own role in breaking barriers. Ideally, future research on abusive supervision would include longitudinal studies, in which followers and abusive supervisors are followed for a longer period of time. Such studies could also include observations as well as others' perceptions.

Although the follower is the focal point in our barriers model, we want to highlight the supervisor's responsibility in ending the abuse by changing his or her behavior. To fully understand the sustained nature of abusive supervision and, consequently, to prevent dysfunctional leader-follower relationships, more research is needed on the reasons why leaders do not simply change the way they act. That is, what are the barriers that make it difficult for leaders to change their behavior or to end the abusive relationship? Ending the abuse may be beneficial to supervisors as abusive supervision also has negative consequences for supervisors themselves, such as increased feelings of guilt and lost moral credits (Liao, Liu, Li, & Song, 2018) and decreased need fulfillment and relaxation (Foulek, Lanaj, Tu, Erez, & Archaubeau, 2018) as well as reduced work engagement (Qin, Huang, Johnson, Hu, & Ju, 2018). It is also likely that barriers for supervisors and barriers for followers interact. That is, research has shown that abusive supervisors are unlikely to change their behavior unless their perception of the follower changes (Simon et al., 2015). Considering the depleting effects of abusive supervision on followers' resources, followers are unlikely to provide their leader with reasons to change their behavior, and in fact, leaders may even feel entitled to behave more abusively (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011). That is, leaders, given their high-power position, may feel wronged when followers are unable to deliver what they feel they are entitled to (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid,

1978; Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). As a consequence, leaders may feel justified to reduce further “suffering” (Zitek et al., 2010) by exploiting their followers even further (Whitman, Halbesleben, & Shanine, 2013) which in turn may lead to more depletion in the follower. As such, these dynamics can be compared to a vortex: the follower’s resources get more drained, the supervisor feels more justified, sucking them both into a downward spiral with the abuse becoming more and more difficult to escape.

Finally, our model is specifically aimed at explaining why it is difficult for employees to escape an abusive *supervisor*. In line with ecological models (Stokols, 1992), we posit that the specifics of the context in which the abuse takes place is of major importance in order to explain why victims of abuse do not leave. As such, the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision model is not directly applicable to psychological abuse outside of the supervisor-follower relationship. However, it may inspire scholars to cast a larger net to look for relevant factors that facilitate sustained abuse within organizations in general and for instance include co-worker abuse or abuse from customers. For example, team dynamics are very likely to play an important role in explaining why victims of co-worker directed abuse do not leave the organization, barriers related to the law as well as organizational norms and policies may be applicable to this specific context as well.

Additionally, there is a potential for cross-pollination between different domains like abuse in the work and the domestic domain. For example, where employees are more likely to tolerate bad working conditions due to ‘calling’ this might extend to co-worker as well as customer abuse. An example might be workers in animal shelters who are regularly abused by individuals who commit animal abuse and whose animals are taken in custody but are unlikely to leave because their commitment is to helping the animals. Similarly, social identity may prevent

victims of abusive supervisors *as well as* victims of domestic abuse from leaving their abuser. While domestic abusers tend to isolate their spouses from important others (e.g., friends and family see Grigsby & Hartman, 1997), victims may create a new identity by forming new relationships with others who are related to the abuser (e.g., friends and family of the abuser) and/or building their own family with the abuser, thus tying their social identity to the abuser and his/her network.

CONCLUSION

We present the Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision to explain why it is so difficult for followers to end an abusive supervisory relationship. To grasp the multi-layered dynamics that can explain the sustained character of abusive supervision, we focused our attention a broad range of barriers, ranging from external barriers (e.g., lack of laws) to internal ones (e.g., personality). We argue that the prolonged nature of abusive supervision cannot be understood within the limits of leader-follower dynamics alone, but instead involves societal, organizational, dyadic, and intra-individual factors that should be taken into account. We hope that our model will serve as a theoretical framework to guide systematic empirical research on the topic, creating a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the abuse and ways to get victims to safety.

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Figure 1

The Barriers Model of Abusive Supervision



Kimberley Breevaart (breevaart@essb.eur.nl) is an Associate Professor of Organizational Psychology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in The Netherlands. Her main research topic is leadership; she studies abusive supervision, day-to-day leadership, and the relations between personality, leadership, and employee well-being. She is currently section editor at *Stress & Health*.

Barbara Wisse (b.m.wisse@rug.nl) is Professor of Organizational Behavior and Leadership Processes at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands) and Chair of Management at Durham University (United Kingdom). Much of her research focuses explicitly on (bright and dark sides of) power and leadership processes.

Birgit Schyns (birgit.schyns@neoma-bs.fr) is Professor of OB at Neoma Business School and membre associé laboratoire C2S Université de Reims. She worked in Germany, the Netherlands, and in the UK. Her research focuses on relationships, followers' perceptions and the dark side of leadership. She has served as associate editor and editorial board member.