



**Being suspicious in the workplace: The role of suspicion and negative views of others in the workplace in the perception of abusive supervision**

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**Abstract**

Two studies are presented to examine the relationship between trait suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision as moderated by implicit leadership theories. The first study is a survey study, the second study is an experimental vignette study. Research reported in this manuscript focuses on the relationship between trait suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision. Based on previous research, we assume that suspicion is positively related to the perception of abusive supervision. The role implicit theories play in this relationship is examined. Results of both studies indicate that suspicion is positively related to the perception of abusive supervision and that implicit leadership theories moderate the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision. Results are interpreted in terms of biases in leadership perception as well as the reversing-the-lens perspective. While there is progress in taking into account follower characteristics and the resulting perceptual biases in the study of constructive leadership phenomena such as transformational leadership, we still know less about the follower perception aspect of destructive leadership phenomena. With this research, we extend research into the influence of follower characteristics on the perception of abusive supervision and also look at boundary condition of this relationship by including implicit leadership theories as a moderator.

## Plain language abstract

Why is it important to look at follower characteristics in the perception of leadership? When we give feedback to leaders, for example in the context of 360 degree feedback, this feedback should be as bias-free as possible, so that leaders understand which of their behaviours are problematic. At the same time, followers who perceive abusive supervision suffer even if their perception is not entirely correct. Here, research into what makes followers perceive more abusive supervision can help derive recommendations for potential follower-focused interventions.

Being suspicious in the workplace: The role of suspicion and negative views of others in the workplace in the perception of abusive supervision

Introduction

Research and practice of leadership is often focused on the leader. As a consequence, in leadership research, follower ratings are often taken as accurate reflections of leader behaviour. However, this view has been more and more challenged by leadership researchers, acknowledging the biases of follower perceptions (for an overview see Hansbrough, Lord, and Schyns, 2015; [Hansbrough, Lord, Schyns, Foti, Liden, & Acton, 2020](#)). Particularly, in the reversing-the-lens perspective (Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten, 2014; Wang, Van Iddekinge, Zhang, and Bishoff, 2019) it is acknowledged that follower characteristics, such as their personality, are relevant in the leadership process. Here, follower characteristics are considered relevant in the perception of leadership but also in terms of triggering leader behaviour.

While the aim of research into positive leadership style is mainly to assess actual leader behaviour, the most prominent approach in terms of negative leadership styles, that is, abusive supervision, is defined as a follower perception (Tepper, 2000). This makes it even more relevant to examine the influences on this perception. Indeed, Martinko, Harvey, Brees, and Mackay (2013) have criticised previous research for not paying enough attention to the definition of abusive supervision and rather falling into the trap of using follower ratings as an accurate description of leader behaviour. This is problematic as it disregards the variance due to different perceptions of the same behaviour (Schyns, Felfe, and Schilling, 2018). Notably, in organisational contexts, it might limit the interventions that are taken to address the consequences of abusive supervision. While clearly the leader is a first point of intervention, knowing more about biases in follower perceptions can help organisations to create interventions for followers as well.

Previous research into the perception of abusive supervision has focused on concepts such as negative affectivity and hostile attribution style (Brees, Martinko, and Harvey, 2016). Brees et al. (2016) argue that followers' hostile attribution style, negative affectivity, trait anger, and entitlement will lead them to "focus on their supervisor's negative behavior and/or perceive it as hostile and thus be predisposed toward perceptions of supervisor abuse" (p. 407). Particularly, Brees et al. (2016) define hostile attribution style as external and stable attribution of one's own failures to others. We argue here that suspicion is another relevant antecedent of followers' perception of abusive supervision. Suspicion is defined as the "degree to which a person is uncertain ... thereby stimulating a construal of motives in an effort to assess potential deceptive intent." (Kim and Levine, 2011, p. 52). Bobko, Barelka, and Hirschfeld (2014) define suspicion as comprising of uncertainty, cognitive activity, and malintent. The latter implies that individuals high in suspicion are particularly likely to attributing negative motives to others (including their leaders). The focus on attributed malintent makes suspicion a particularly interesting trait to include in research into leadership as leadership is an interaction process (e.g., May, Wesche, Heinitz, and Kerschreiter, 2014), so that attributed malintent can lead to a negative spiral of abuse.

While research into suspicion is often experimental and focuses on raising suspicion in participants (e.g., Hilton, Fein, and Miller, 1993), some authors investigate suspicion on a trait level (e.g., Bond and Yee, 2004). In this line of research, Bond, Thompson, and Malloy (2005) define generalized communication suspicion as a "relatively enduring, stable predisposition to suspect deception by others during communicative discourse." (p. 64). They cite Levine and McCormack (1991, 326), "suspicion involves the belief that another may behave in a negative and malevolent fashion". We argue here that followers high in suspicion will perceive more abusive supervision due to this general attribution.

In addition to introducing a novel antecedent of the perception of abusive supervision, we extend previous research into the direct relationship between follower characteristics and the perception of abusive supervision by including a possible boundary condition of this relationship. Particularly, we examine the role of implicit leadership theories (Eden and Leviatan, 1975; [for a recent overview see Lord, Epitropaki, Foti, & Hansbrough, 2020](#)), that is, everyday theories about the traits and behaviours of leaders (e.g., Schyns and Schilling, 2011). We argue that personality traits can interact with views of others to increase the likelihood of negative perceptions of others. This extends the reversing-the-lens perspective (Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) by examining the interaction between follower characteristics, adding to a better understanding of the follower role in the leadership process. Here we focus, in line with the tendency of suspicious individuals to view others in a negative light, on the only clearly negative implicit leadership theory out of a commonly used implicit leadership theory framework, that is, tyranny (Offermann & Coats, 2018; Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994).

In addition, based on research into the different roles of semantic and episodic memory in perception processes (Symons and Johnson, 1997; for a leadership example see, Hansbrough [et al.](#), ~~Lord, Schyns, Foti, Liden, & Aetn~~, 2020), we also extend previous research by investigating in how far the reference of abusive supervision, that is, whether abusive supervision is towards to self or towards followers in general (Study 1), influences the relationships under investigation here. In the following, we report the results of a field and an experimental study focusing on the role of suspicion in the perception of abusive supervision.

**Follower personality and the perception of abusive supervision**

“Researchers appear to be assuming that commonly used abusive supervision measures are objective and reliable measures of abusive supervisory behaviors” (Martinko *et*

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3 *al.*, 2013; p. S121), despite the clear definition as a perceptual phenomenon and the  
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5 measurement from the followers' point of view (see Martinko *et al.*, 2013; Tepper, 2007).  
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8 This focus on perception in the definition of abusive supervision makes it useful to apply the  
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10 reversing-the-lens perspective (Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014). This approach puts  
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12 followers into the leadership equation as an active part and implies that follower  
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14 characteristics play a role in how they construct leadership but also in how leaders behave  
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16 towards them. From research into outcomes of perceived abusive supervision, we know that  
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18 perception of abusive supervision is what has an effect on followers. For example, Schyns *et*  
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20 *al.* (2018) found in two experimental studies that perception of abusive supervision partly  
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22 mediates the relationship between leader behaviour and reactions. Thus, whether or not the  
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24 leaders behaviour is intended as abusive or even whether or not others in the same situation  
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26 would perceive it that way is only one factor adding to the perception of (and reaction to)  
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28 abusive supervision (Wang *et al.*, 2019). This means that to be able to tackle the issue of  
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30 abusive supervision, we need to examine leader behaviour but also in how far some followers  
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32 might be more inclined to perceive abusive supervision than others.  
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38 We focus here on follower personality as an antecedent of perception (e.g., overview by  
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40 Martinko *et al.*, 2013). Previous research in this area investigated, for example, negative  
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42 affectivity (Mackay, Frieder, Brees, and Martinko, 2017), neuroticism (Mackay *et al.*, 2017;  
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44 Wang *et al.*, 2019; Wang, Harms, and Mackey, 2015, Zhang and Bednall, 2015) as well as  
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46 narcissism (Wang, and Jiang, 2014) and found positive relationships between these  
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48 personality traits and the perception of abusive supervision.  
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52 Particularly interesting for the study of suspicion is research into the perception of  
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54 abusive supervision that focused on hostile attribution styles (Bress *et al.*, 2016; Martinko,  
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56 Sikora, and Harvey, 2012; Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, and Douglas, 2011). Hostile attribution  
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58 style consists of external and stable attributions towards for negative outcomes. That is,  
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followers high in hostile attribution style will consider supervisor abusive leadership as unrelated to their own behaviour as well as stable. Indeed, the results supported that hostile attribution style contributes to the perception of abusive supervision. Interestingly, though hostile attribution style refers to attributions about negative outcomes, such as negative feedback from supervisors, Brees *et al.* (2016) used a neutral feedback scenario to assess effects of hostile attribution style on the perception of abusive supervision.

This research is relevant as it has been shown that suspicion is related to negative attributions to others (e.g., Fein and Hilton, 2005). Suspicion as a trait variable (Bobko, Barelka, Hirschfeld, and Lyons, 2014) is likely to contribute to cognitive bias such that “suspicious individuals may appraise a particular emotional display differently than non-suspicious individuals.” (Bobko *et al.*, 2014; p. 338). We conclude that individuals high in suspicion are more likely to see something negative in another person’s behaviour. This goes further than hostile attribution style as possibly highly suspicious individuals do not even need negative information for their attributions of malintent. Hence, knowing that follower personality in general affects leader perception and that suspicion is related to attributions of malintent, we assume that followers high in suspicion will interpret their supervisor’s behaviour in a negative way and thus perceive more abusive supervision.

*H1: Suspicion is related to the perception of abusive supervision.*

As outlined in the introduction, we also include a boundary condition of the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision. Specifically, we are introducing implicit leadership theories, that is, follower views of leaders in general, as a moderator.

### **Implicit leadership theories**

In leadership research, views of leaders in general are captured under the label implicit leadership theories (Eden and Leviatan, 1975), which are cognitive structures stored



in the memory that will be retrieved when confronted with a 'leader' (Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, and Blascovich, 1996). According to Offermann *et al.* (1994), implicit leadership theories consist of several dimensions, namely, sensitivity, dedication, charisma, attractiveness, masculinity, intelligence, strength, and tyranny. The latter is the only truly negative aspect of implicit leadership theories and has been called antiprototypical by Epitropaki and Martin (2004). According to Offermann *et al.* (1994), tyranny reflects "feelings of abuse of power" (p. 56). This negative dimension of implicit leadership theories is particularly relevant when looking at the perception of abusive supervision (Martinko *et al.*, 2013).

Previous research has shown the relevance of implicit leadership theories in the perception of leaders. For example, they are related to the perceptions of transformational leadership (Shamir, 1995) as well as to ratings of relationships between leaders and followers (Leader-Member Exchange; Epitropaki and Martin, 2005). Hence, in line with this previous research, we argue that the perception of actual leaders is related to how individuals see leaders in general (see also Shondrick, Dinh, and Lord, 2010). That is, how followers think about typical or ideal leaders is related to how they view their own leaders.

Here we argue that followers high in suspicion who are already likely to attribute malintent to their leader's behaviour will have an even stronger tendency to do so if they hold negative views of leaders in general, that is, are high in the implicit leadership theory of tyranny. That is, the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision will increase when negative implicit leadership theories are high.

*H2: The relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision is moderated by negative implicit leadership theories, so that the higher the negative implicit leadership theories the higher the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision.*

**Study 1: Perception of abusive supervision to the self and to followers in general**

Abusive supervision is mostly assessed via ratings about the leader’s behaviour towards the rater (e.g., “my supervisor ridicules me”). Changing the wording from “I” to “followers” constitutes a reference shift (see Klein, Conn, Smith, and Sorra, 2001). Recent theory and research investigating the role of memory in ratings of leadership has highlighted the different roles of episodic memory versus semantic memory in the response to questions regarding leadership (Hansbrough *et al.*, 2020). Notably, for semantic memory a general impression of a leader is sufficient while episodic memory relates to specific experienced events (Hansbrough *et al.*, 2015; Hansbrough *et al.*, 2020).

We argue here that the different references of assessment could influence ratings, such as that there is less bias in self-ratings due to them tapping more into the episodic memory than the semantic memory (Symons and Johnson, 1997). We argue that having experienced abusive leadership constitutes a self-referenced encoding condition, while giving a judgment about general abusive supervision is a more heuristic memory task.

Therefore, we differentiated between ratings of abusive supervision towards the rater him/herself and ratings of abusive supervision towards followers in general (e.g., “my supervisor ridicules his/her co-workers”). While we expected suspicion to be related to both types of ratings, we assume that suspicion is more strongly related to the perception of abusive supervision toward others than to the person him/herself as the former is likely to be more strongly relating to semantic memory.

*H3: The relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision toward others is higher than the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision toward the person him/herself.*

### Sample and design

The sample consisted of 103 US American adults, 52 men, 51 women (mean age 41;  $SD = 11$ ) who took part in a survey collected by a panel provider. The criteria for inclusion in the study were, US-based, currently employed, working full time, and having a supervisor at the time of the study. The data were collected in 2014. The participants worked with their supervisor for an average of 3.7 years ( $SD = 3.9$ ). The participants were randomly distributed to the conditions, so that about half of them ( $N = 51$ ) rated abusive supervision with a reference to themselves, the other half ( $N = 52$ ) with a general reference.

### Instruments

*Suspicion* was assessed using the Generalized Communication Suspicion Scale (GCS-Scale; Bond and Yee, 2005;  $\alpha = .84$ ). A sample item reads "People rarely tell you what they are really thinking". The scale ranges from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree".

*Implicit leadership theories* were assessed using the 10-item tyranny dimension of the instrument by Offermann *et al.* (1994;  $\alpha = .94$ ). A sample item is "manipulative". The scale ranges from 1 = "not at all characteristic" to 10 = "extremely characteristic".

*Abusive supervision* was assessed with the 15-item instrument by Tepper (2000). Sample items are "...tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid." (for self-reference;  $\alpha = .94$ ) and "... tells his/her co-workers that their thoughts or feelings are stupid." (for general reference;  $\alpha = .97$ ). Both scales range from 1 = "I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior (with me)" to 5 = "He/she uses this behavior very often (with me)."

### Results

We first examined the mean values for the perception of abusive supervision for self- versus general reference. Perception of abusive supervision toward followers in general was higher than toward the self, but only on a 10% level of significance ( $M_{self} = 1.56$ ,  $M_{general} = 1.88$ ,  $t = 1.83$ ).

For both self-reference ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ) and general reference ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ), we found a significant relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision, supporting H1. We examined the whether or not the two correlations are significantly different from each other but that is not the case ( $z = -.54, n.s.$ ), despite the relatively large difference between the coefficients. Thus, H3 is rejected. <sup>i</sup>

To test H2, we conducted a regression analysis using the process macro (Hayes, 2017). Table 1 shows that the interaction effect of tyranny is only significant for self-reference and only on the  $p < .10$  level. Since the sample size is rather small, we investigated the conditional effects. Table 2 shows the relationships for individuals at different levels of the implicit leadership theories dimension tyranny. In line with H2, for followers high in tyranny, the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision is higher but only for self-reference of abusive supervision. The tool G-Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, and Lang, 2009) allows to determine the power of an analysis post-hoc using the effect size F, the actual sample size and the alpha-level. This analysis revealed a power of over .95, lending credibility to the results, despite the relatively small sample size per group.

### Study 2: Replication of Moderation Effects in Experimental Study

In field studies, we do not know if behaviour actually differs between leaders of the participants. Therefore, in an experimental setting using vignette descriptions of leaders, we can say with more confidence whether perceiver personality influences perception or whether leaders treat followers with different personalities differently (see Brees *et al.*, 2016; Schyns *et al.*, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2019). Previous research only showed participants one vignette. Specifically, two studies are relevant here. Brees *et al.* (2016) used an ambiguous feedback talk of a leader. They argued that this approach would allow participants to project their attributions to a somewhat neutral leader behaviour. Wang *et al.* (2019) instead used a clearly abusive description of a leader.

There are some notable differences in the design and results of those studies, that informed our decision to use several vignettes. Brees *et al.* (2016) used a video vignette depicting negative feedback from a supervisor as a stimulus to keep the actual supervisor behaviour that participants were exposed to constant. As they expected, follower hostile attribution style, entitlement, negative affectivity, and trait anger were positively related to the perception of abusive supervision. Similarly, Wang *et al.* (2019; study 2) used a vignette approach combined with a field study to examine rater personality effects on the perception of abusive supervision over and above actual leader behaviour. Interestingly, in their study, follower characteristics (Big Five) were unrelated to perceptions of abusive supervision depicted in vignettes but related to the perception of abusive supervision of actual leaders, leading the authors to conclude that leaders might treat followers differently depending on their characteristics. One reason for the differences in results between those two studies might relate to the way the vignettes were constructed. While Brees *et al.* (2016) used an ambiguous vignette, Wang *et al.* (2019) used a clearly abusive vignette, leaving less room for perception biases. Hence, in study 2, we will use different vignettes to clarify which leader behaviour is most prone to perception effects. Following from the differences in results between the Brees *et al.* and the Wang *et al.* study, we assume that a more neutral vignette is most likely to be influenced by rater effects. Thus,

*H4: The relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision is strongest when participants are presented neutral vignettes.*

### *Sample*

The overall sample for Study 2 comprised 243 participants, recruited via two online panel providers. Data were collected in 2015. The criteria for inclusion in the study were, US-based and having at least 3 months of work experience. Overall mean age was 37.39 years

old ( $SD = 11.47$ ). Of the participants, 91 were men and 152 women, Participants worked in various industries. Data were collected at two points in time to separate measurement. Almost all participants ( $N = 238$ ) were employed at the time of the study and most (68.7% worked full time). ~~Participants worked in various industries.~~ The average work experience was 17.36 years ( $SD = 12.01$ ).

### Design

At T1, we assessed suspicion as well as implicit leadership theories. At T2, participants were randomly assigned into different conditions. They were shown a brief photo sequence of a scenario about a leader-follower interaction (for a similar design with text vignettes see Schyns *et al.*, 2018). Each sequence consisted of two photos, accompanied by a short text. The first photo depicted a low intensity smile with the text “You are about to get in the office of your supervisor and you handshake...”. The next photo varied per condition and was either happy, neutral, slightly angry, or strongly angry and the text read “...you sit and you have a discussion regarding the unfinished presentation...”. Finally a brief text was given to finish the sequence (“... the discussion is over, you say goodbye and leave the office.”). Group sizes were as follows: Happy ( $N = 52$ ); neutral ( $N = 62$ ); slightly angry ( $N = 68$ ); strongly angry ( $N = 61$ ).

### Instruments

*Suspicion, implicit leadership theories, and abusive supervision* (self-reference) were assessed using the same instruments as in study 2. The internal consistency were  $\alpha = .87$ ,  $\alpha = .93$ , and  $\alpha = .97$ , respectively.

### Results

The means for happy, neutral, slightly angry, and strongly angry were  $M = 1.65$ ,  $M = 2.14$ ,  $M = 2.74$ , and  $M = 3.15$ , respectively, all of which were significantly different from each other.

The only significant correlation between suspicion and abusive supervision for the neutral vignette ( $r = .03$ ,  $r = .38$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $r = .20$ , and  $r = .10$ , for happy, neutral, slightly angry, and strongly angry, respectively). As expected the strongest correlation was found for the neutral vignette, followed by the slightly angry vignette. Both those vignettes leave more room for perception effects than the happy or very angry vignettes. However, the difference between the neutral and slightly angry vignette is not significant ( $z = 1.10$ ,  $n.s.$ ). The results partially support H4.

To test H2, we conducted a regression analysis using the process macro (Hayes, 2017). Due to the fact that the differences in the conditions on abusive supervision were all significant and in a rank order, we used condition as a continuous variable, ranging from happy to strongly angry similar to Schyns *et al.* (2018). We entered this variable as a covariate in this model. Table 3 shows that there is a main effect for condition, a main effect for tyranny but not for suspicion contrary to our expectations, and an interaction effect of suspicion and tyranny. Table 4 shows that, as hypothesised, for individuals who hold high implicit leadership theories of tyranny, the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision is stronger than for those low in implicit leadership theories of tyranny.

### General Discussion

Our studies contribute to emerging research on follower antecedents of the perception of abusive supervision. The aim of the two studies presented here was to investigate the effects of suspicion on the perception of abusive supervision as moderated by negative implicit leadership theories (tyranny). Based on the reversing-the-lens perspective (Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2019) and research showing that follower personality influences the perception of abusive supervision (e.g., Brees *et al.*, 2016), we argued and found that follower trait suspicion is related the perception of abusive supervision.



Suspicion is defined by a suspension of judgment (Bobko *et al.*, 2014; Kim and Levine, 2011), in so far that individuals high in suspicion are more likely to query the reasons for an observed behaviour. We argued and found that implicit theories can increase the effect of suspicion on the perception of abusive supervision as they might tip the balance of judgment towards the negative side. Specifically, when individuals high in suspicion also hold negative implicit leadership theories, they are more likely to rate their leader's behaviour as abusive. In line with this assumption, we found an interaction effect between suspicion and the implicit leadership theory dimension of tyranny, such that there is a stronger relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision towards the target for raters high in implicit leadership theory dimension of tyranny. Likely those high in the implicit leadership theories dimension of tyranny think of their leaders as more abusive, since possible abusive behaviour is in line with their negative expectations.

We replicated the same effect in an experimental study, using leaders' facial expressions as a manipulation, in that negative implicit leadership theories moderated the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision, controlling for leader facial expression (as a manipulation of their behaviour). This is an important finding as we know from other research into constructive forms of leadership that the perception of leadership is biased by rater personality (e.g., Hansbrough *et al.*, 2015). Our results support that the same is likely for the perception of negative leadership and that implicit theories have an effect on this relationship. That means that people high in both suspicion and the implicit leadership theories dimension 'tyranny' more likely to perceive abusive supervision. Thus, our studies support the notion that follower characteristics are relevant in the perception of abusive supervision. This result also extends previous research by highlighting the interaction between follower characteristics as antecedents of the perception of abusive supervision. Consequently, when applying a reversing-the-lens perspective, it is important to consider



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3 how combinations follower characteristics might differentially affect the leadership process.

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5 It is subject to future research to investigate in how far this also leads to those individuals

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7 showing more negative outcomes than others when confronted with the same leader

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9 behaviour, such as effects on their well-being (e.g., Schyns *et al.*, 2018). Focusing on

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11 follower emotional and behavioural reactions, Yu and Duffy (2020) found that follower

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13 attribution for abusive supervision plays a role in how they react to abusive supervision.

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15 Where abusive supervision is attributed to the leader's desire to cause harm, anger, more

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17 deviant and fewer organisational citizenship behaviours follow. Instead an attribution to

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19 performance enhancement motives leads to guilt, less deviant and more organisational

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21 citizenship behaviour. Further, Recent research into implicit followership theories has, for

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23 example, suggested that implicit theories can trigger a Pygmalion effect, so that individuals

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25 behave more in line with the theories others have of them, and that implicit theories might

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27 interact in predicting outcomes (Veestraeten, Johnson, Leroy, Sy, & Sels, in press 2020).

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29 Another recent study (Kniffin, Detert, & Leroy, 2020) has shown that individuals

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31 differentiate between leaders and managers in terms of their implicit theories. Here, it would

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33 be interesting to see in how far follower personality differently affects the perceptions of

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35 supervisors labelled within the company as leaders versus managers.

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38 In Study 2, we found that the relationship between suspicion and the perception of  
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40 abusive supervision was highest for the neutral or most ambivalent vignette. If this results  
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42 holds in further replications, it is meaningful to consider as interactions between leaders and  
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44 followers are likely to contain an element of ambiguity that could be interpreted more  
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46 negatively by some followers than by others. For future research, it is therefore important to  
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48 more clearly understand the interactions between leaders and followers. Theoretically, in  
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50 relation to the reversing-the-lens perspective, it is important to acknowledge that the same  
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52 behaviour of the leader might not only be interpreted differently by different followers but  
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that these different interpretations are not independent of how clearly the leader communicates. In practical terms, when giving 360 degree feedback to leaders, taking into account the variation in how a leader is perceived can be very informative as it likely means that the behaviour shown by the leader is ambiguous and thus more open to different interpretations. That is, when developing leaders, using this variation in feedback can be a starting point to consider how to improve leader communication towards followers to lower the risk of ambiguous behaviour being interpreted in a negative way.

At the same time, it seems wise for HR professionals to consider including follower characteristics, such as suspicion and implicit leadership theories, that are known to influence the perception of leader behaviour into questionnaires about leadership. This way, individual differences can be partialled out before giving feedback to the leader. Taking into account follower characteristics in 360 degree feedback processes improves the accuracy of such feedback. Finally, it can also ~~This can also~~ help leaders to understand that, because of a possible misinterpretation of behaviour, they might need to act more carefully around their followers knowing they are prone to interpreting behaviour in a negative way. Being accused of showing abusive supervision by a follower can have negative ramifications for leaders, such as disciplinary consequences. In summary, an accurate understanding of the processes included in abusive supervision will help organisation to tackle the issue from several perspectives, that is, the leader, the follower, and /or their interaction.

It is important to note that while our studies highlight the role of follower characteristics in the perception of abusive supervision, the experimental Study 2 clearly underlines the role that actual supervisor behaviour plays. This result is in line with Wang *et al.*'s (2019) as well as Schyns *et al.*'s (2018) findings that particularly in abusive supervision, the actual behaviour of the leader is relevant. This means in practical terms that when followers perceive leaders as abusive, particularly when they agree in this assessment, it is

crucial for organisations to follow up and take measures to impede abusive supervision in the future.

### Limitations

Although we reported two studies with different designs to replicate the results of a field study in an experimental study, like any other research, this research has limitations. First, Study 1 has a relatively small sample size per subgroup. Nevertheless, the post-hoc power analysis shows that the sample size was adequate. Second, all data are self-report. However, given the research aim to explain biases in the perception of abusive supervision, despite all the issues self-report data entail, a different design would have been difficult to implement. Future research could look at the variation of the perceptions of a supervisor in a field to examine in how far suspicion explains this variation.

### Conclusion

This study indicates that in the perception of abusive leadership biases are equally likely than in ratings of constructive leaders. In addition, the relationship between suspicion and the perception of abusive supervision is influenced by negative implicit leadership theories. The findings can help improve measurement of actual abusive supervision but could also be used to create interventions for individuals high in suspicion to help them interpret (especially ambiguous) leader behaviour in a more positive way.

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**Table 1: Moderated regression ILT Study 1: Abusive supervision self as outcome**

Reference	<u>Unstandardised</u>	p	R <sup>2</sup>	p
general (N = 52)	Coefficient B	<u>value(significance)</u>	<u>(explained</u>	<u>value(significance)</u>
			<u>variance)</u>	
Constant	-.09	.935	.15	.052
Suspicion	.50	.102		
ILT Tyranny	.09	.720		
Suspicion * ILT	-.02	.754		
Tyranny				
Reference self	<u>Unstandardised</u>	<u>p (significance)</u>	<u>R<sup>2</sup></u>	<u>p (significance)</u>
(N = 51)	<u>Coefficient B</u>		<u>(explained</u>	
			<u>variance)</u>	
Constant	1.49	.083	.27	.002
Suspicion	-.01	.973		
ILT Tyranny	-.27	.129		
Suspicion * ILT	.08	.086		
Tyranny				

Note: ILT = implicit leadership theories

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**Table 2: Conditional effects of the suspicion predictor at values of tyranny (Study 1, self-reference)**

<u>ILT</u>	Effect	<u>seStandard</u>	<u>t-value</u>	p	<u>LLCI</u> <u>Lower</u>	<u>ULCI</u> <u>Upper</u>
Tyranny		<u>error</u>		<u>(significance</u>	<u>confidence</u>	<u>confidence</u>
					<u>interval</u>	<u>interval</u>
2.26	.18	.15	1.18	.244	-.125	.478
5.20	.42	.11	3.81	.000	.196	.635
7.44	.60	.17	3.52	.001	.257	.939

Note: ILT = implicit leadership theories

**Table 3: Moderated regression ILT Study 2: Abusive supervision self as outcome**

	<u>Unstandardised</u>	<u>p</u>	<u>R<sup>2</sup> (explained</u>	<u>p</u>
	<u>Coefficient B</u>	<u>(significance)p</u>	<u>variance)R<sup>2</sup></u>	<u>(significance)p</u>
		<u>value</u>		<u>value</u>
Constant	1.73	.003	.40	.000
Version	.50	.000		
Suspicion	-.22	.146		
ILT Tyranny	-.21	.045		
Suspicion * <u>ILT</u>	.07	.010		
Tyranny				

Note: ILT = implicit leadership theories

Table 4: Conditional effects of the suspicion predictor at values of tyranny (Study 2)

ILT	Effect	Standard	t-	p	Lower	Upper
Tyranny		error	value	(significance)p	confidence	confidence
					intervalLLCI	intervalULCI
3.70	.02	.073	.32	.750	-.121	.168
5.70	.16	.056	2.80	.006	.047	.267
7.60	.28	.076	3.71	.000	.133	.434

Note: ILT = implicit leadership theories

## Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> We also use Hayes' (2017) process macro to test H3. Here we included the condition as a control variable in the full moderation analysis. The effect for condition (.18) is not significant ( $p = .287$ ).