Employees’ Behavioral Reactions to Supervisor Aggression: An Examination of Individual and Situational Factors

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This research examines employees’ behavioral reactions to perceived supervisor aggression. The goal is to understand what makes employees react constructively or destructively to aggression. Three types of behavioral reactions are investigated: retaliation, coworker displaced aggression, and problem solving. We suggest employee reactions are influenced by individual and situational characteristics. We test these ideas by examining the moderating effects of 1 individual factor (locus of control) and 2 situational factors (fear of retaliation and behavioral modeling) on the relationships between perceived supervisor aggression and employee behaviors. The results of an experiment and 2 field studies provide support for the predictions and some unexpected findings. Implications for understanding reactions to perceived supervisor aggression are presented.

Keywords: abusive supervision, aggression, retaliation, displaced aggression, problem solving

Today’s workplace is often portrayed as arduous and harsh, with organizational authorities exploiting and abusing employees and employees engaging in deceitful and insidious work behavior (e.g., Fisher, 2005; Gurchiek, 2005; Pachter, 2003; Thelen, 2009). Recent reports from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1998, 2005) support these contentions and have shown that incidents of interpersonal aggression (behavior that is carried out with the intent of injuring or aggravating another person; Eron, 1987) are on the rise.

This is of particular concern, given the negative impact workplace aggression has on organizations and employees. For example, research shows that workplace aggression impairs employee morale, psychological health, and productive behaviors (e.g., Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Glomb & Liao, 2003; Henschovis & Barling, 2010; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Tepper, 2000). Further, such acts diminish organizational capital and production and increase insurance premiums and injury compensation (Detert, Treviño, Burris, & Andiappan, 2007; Dunlop & Lee, 2004). Given the prevalence and destructive nature of workplace aggression, research in this area has grown in an effort to understand its antecedents and consequences.

One area of inquiry has emphasized consequences of supervisors who are aggressive with employees (see Tepper, 2007). Supervisor aggression is defined as employees’ perceptions of the supervisor’s intentionally harmful behavior against them (Schat, Desmarais, & Kelloway, 2005). Understanding the impact of supervisor aggression is important because supervisors are considered a primary source of aggression at work (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001; Neuman & Keashly, 2003). It also represents a particularly stressful, challenging, and threatening situation for employees because supervisors maintain control over things that are of value to employees’ work lives (e.g., resources, feedback; Tepper, 2007). Supervisors who are aggressive undermine subordinates’ ability to function effectively at work (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007; Tepper, 2000) and threaten subordinates’ sense of self (Thau & Mitchell, 2010) and home life (Carlson, Ferguson, Perrewé, & Whitten, 2011; Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Indeed, research has shown that supervisor aggression generally provokes quite destructive reactions from employees (e.g., Inness, Barling, & Turner, 2005; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008), with only a handful of studies showing employees’ constructive reactions (e.g., Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001; Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). Yet, what makes employees react destructively versus constructively is not entirely clear. That is, research shows that of victims of supervisor aggression, not all act destructively and not all act constructively (Bies & Tripp, 1996, 1998). Given that workplace aggression is escalating (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998, 2005) and employees identify supervisors as a dominant source of aggression (Cortina et al., 2001; Neuman & Keashly, 2003), examination of which factors enhance or mitigate different reactions to supervisor aggression is needed. The impact of supervisor aggression is significant; it is estimated to cost U.S. corporations billions...
of dollars annually (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). Additionally, understanding how organizations can minimize destructive and enhance constructive behavior is of practical value for decision makers. Doing so may reduce costs of destructive work behavior and potentially foster an effective and productive work environment for employees.

Our purpose in this article is to develop and test a model of employees' behavioral reactions to perceived supervisor aggression. We investigate three types of reactions: retaliation (aggressive reactions against the supervisor), displaced aggression (aggressive reactions against coworkers), and problem solving (constructive efforts made to address the supervisor aggression). Research and theory suggest each of these types of reactions occur, but little research attention has been given to understanding when victims are likely to respond to supervisor aggression destructively versus constructively. Thus, identifying moderators is an essential next step (Tepper, 2007). To this end, our research identifies and tests one individual factor (locus of control [LOC]) and two situational factors (fear of retaliation and behavioral modeling) that theory (e.g., social learning theory, Bandura, 1973; frustration-aggression theory, Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939) suggests influence reactions to perceived threats, in particular, aggression from individuals in authority.

Our research provides an extension to the literature and is also practically significant. First, our work meets the call to examine various boundary effects of employees' reactions to supervisor aggression (Tepper, 2007). Because research has shown not all victims of supervisor aggression react in the same way (Bies & Tripp, 1996, 1998), understanding what motivates destructive and constructive reactions is needed. Our work extends previous research by considering factors that heighten employees' sense of control (i.e., LOC, fear of retaliation), which allows for more constructive ways of responding to an aggressive supervisor. Additionally, we theorize that there are work factors that increase employees' salience about the types of behaviors that are accepted in the work environment and invoke behavioral learning (i.e., behavioral modeling, fear of retaliation) that influences employees' reactions. Second, by considering constructive reactions (i.e., problem solving), our research extends current workplace aggression models, which have traditionally focused on the negative consequences of aggression to organizations and its members (e.g., Baron, 2004; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Hershcovis et al., 2007; Neuman & Baron, 1998). Third, previous research has primarily examined reactions to supervisor aggression via survey methodology. Our research uses both experimental and survey approaches. The enhanced internal validity of the experimental design complements the dominant survey method. Finally, the results of our study may assist organizations in lessening destructive work behavior. Supervisor aggression is a growing problem for organizations and employees (cf. Tepper et al., 2006). By identifying factors that influence employees’ reactions to supervisor aggression, organizations gain an understanding of how to foster more constructive behaviors and lessen destructive behaviors of their employees. Below, we review likely responses to supervisor aggression and provide the theoretical foundation for our predictions.

Theoretical Overview

Behavioral Reactions to Perceived Supervisor Aggression

Retaliation. Theory and research suggest retaliation is a primary response to aggression. A basic tenet of the frustration-aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939) is that aggression provokes retaliation. This proposition is supported by social psychology research (see Anderson & Bushman, 2002, for a review). In the organizational literature, theorists have argued that retaliation allows victims to get back at the transgressor (e.g., Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Skarlicki & Folger, 2004). Negative reciprocity principles of social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960) provide the basis of this claim. Reciprocity acts as a behavioral norm, guiding patterns of interactions. Negative reciprocity patterns suggest victims of mistreatment will return mistreatment to the harmdoer. Research supports these arguments and has shown that employees retaliate against supervisors for perceived abuse (e.g., Dupré, Inness, Connelly, Barling, & Hopton, 2006; Inness et al., 2005; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper et al., 2008, 2009; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marris, 2009).

Displaced aggression. Even though retaliation is a common response to aggression, some situations do not allow for it. In these instances, the frustration-aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939) suggests, individuals displace their frustration on other targets. Displaced aggression is explained as a cathartic act—one that allows individuals to vent frustration when aggressing against the transgressor is not a viable option. Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, and Miller’s (2000) meta-analysis of psychology experiments found displaced aggression is a strong reaction. Further, organizational research has shown that employees displace aggression on targets other than the supervisor when victimized by supervisor aggression (Hooibler & Brass, 2006; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Our research examines displaced aggression targeted toward victims’ peers and coworkers.

Problem solving. Both retaliation and displaced aggression are destructive responses to supervisor aggression. Yet, theory and research suggest not all employees react destructively (Bies & Tripp, 1996, 1998). For instance, reactance theory (Wortman & Brehm, 1975) posits that both destructive and constructive reactions may occur because people strive to maintain a sense of personal control. Constructive responses, such as problem solving, allow victims to regain control by trying to resolve the situation (Weisz, McCabe, & Denning, 1994). Lazarus and colleagues' (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) research on stress coping strategies also suggests that threatening events (i.e., supervisor aggression) stimulate evaluations on how to best cope with the harm and make problem solving possible. Indeed, research has shown that some victims of supervisor aggression react with problem solving (e.g., reconciliation, Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001, 2006; constructive resistance strategies, Tepper et al., 2001, 2007).

In sum, employees may respond to supervisor aggression with retaliation, displaced aggression, and/or problem solving. But what determines the behavior in which an individual engages? Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests reactions to perceived aggression are dependent on individual and situational factors (cf., Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bandura, 1991; Baron, 2004). We review theory and research that suggest locus of control (LOC; an
individual factor) and the situational factors fear of retaliation and behavioral modeling should affect employees’ reactions to supervisor aggression. We expect these factors will moderate the relationship between supervisor aggression and employee destructive and constructive reactions.

**LOC as a Moderator of the Supervisor Aggression–Employee Behavior Relationship**

Our first moderating factor is LOC—a trait that involves the extent to which individuals believe that events are contingent on their own behavioral control or are determined by others, fate, or chance (Rotter, 1966). LOC has a strong influence over individuals’ behavioral choices because it impacts the degree to which individuals believe they have the ability to control events affecting them. Individuals with a high LOC, called *internals*, are particularly self-determined and motivated to control their social environment in ways that minimize threats to and maximize benefits for themselves (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Individuals with a low LOC, called *externals*, believe other sources affect what happens to them; consequently, they do not believe they have the ability to exact change that will effectively alter their environment (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests personality traits that involve individuals’ sense of personal control influence their reactions to perceived aggression. Similarly, models of organizational behavior that theorize about individuals’ reactions to perceived work threats highlight the importance of considering LOC (e.g., Bennett, 1998; Martinko & Gardner, 1982; Martinko, Gundlach, & Douglas, 2002).

Additionally, existing theory and research on personal control suggest internals are better able to create and shape more favorable work experiences (Phares, 1976) and handle challenging and threatening situations (Gatchel, 1980; Wanberg, 1997). Fiske and Taylor (1984) argued this is because internals see themselves as “causal agents” with the ability to change situations directly. Thus, when faced with threatening situations, internals attempt to reduce perceived threats by engaging in behavior to change the environment (see Ng, Sorensen, & Eby, 2006 and Perrewé & Spector, 2002, for reviews). In contrast, externals, guided by futility beliefs, are less able to see opportunities to control threatening situations and, consequently, tend to act ineffectively and even destructively in the face of a threat. Their external orientation combined with the threat from the environment (i.e., supervisor aggression) creates a sense of helplessness, which promotes deviant behavior (Martinko & Gardner, 1982). Theorists contend that externals’ destructive behavior reduces the strain associated with their perceived inability to change their current situation (Bennett, 1998; Greenberger & Strasser, 1991).

Given the motivational force of LOC in guiding individuals’ behaviors in threatening situations, we believe LOC is an important trait to consider with regard to reactions to supervisor aggression. Supervisors who aggress against their employees pose a significant threat to employees’ work lives (Tepper, 2007). These are individuals who yell, scream, undermine, intimidate, and verbally abuse their subordinates (Keashly, 1998; Keashly et al., 1994). Given the threat that supervisor aggression poses to subordinates and the motivational effects of LOC, we predict LOC will impact employees’ reactions to supervisor aggression.

Research suggests that LOC influences individuals’ reactions to supervisor aggression. For example, studies have shown that internals are more likely than externals to engage in problem solving behavior (Spector, 1982). Research has shown that internals, when challenged, exert more effort and persist longer in situations that present barriers to achieving goals than do externals (Phares, 1976). Further, internals are more likely than externals to engage in more problem-focused activities (Hahn, 2000). Research has also shown that internals are more likely than externals to engage in problem solving behavior when they experience a high degree of stress (Arslan, Dilmac, & Hamarta, 2009; Parkes, 1984). Last, meta-analytic evidence (Ng et al., 2006) has shown that internals are better equipped to deal with negative tasks and negative social interactions and are more likely than externals to engage in problem solving.

Research has shown that externals are less likely than internals to engage in behavior that attempts to effectively resolve threatening situations and, instead, are more likely to behave destructively (Fox & Spector, 1999; Marcus & Schuler, 2004; Österman et al., 1999; Romi & Iksowitz, 1990; Storms & Spector, 1987; Zaimuddin & Taluja, 1990). For example, Fox and Spector (1999) found externals are more likely than internals to engage in behavior that is counterproductive. Further, Wei and Si (2011) found that externals were more likely to respond to abusive supervision (a form of supervisor aggression) with destructive work behavior (i.e., sabotage, production deviance, theft).

Overall, this review suggests LOC will influence both constructive and destructive reactions to supervisor aggression. Because internals believe they can exact change in their environment, particularly when dealing with stressful and threatening situations, we contend they are more likely to engage in problem solving behavior when they encounter an aggressive supervisor. Conversely, because externals are more likely to react destructively to stressful and threatening events, we predict they will be more likely to engage in retaliation and coworker displaced aggression when dealing with an aggressive supervisor. In sum, a higher LOC will influence problem solving reactions and a lower LOC will influence destructive reactions to supervisor aggression.

**Hypothesis 1:** The positive relationship between supervisor aggression and (a) problem solving will be stronger when locus of control is higher than lower, and the positive relationships between supervisor aggression and (b) retaliation and (c) coworker displaced aggression will be stronger when locus of control is lower than higher.

**Situational Moderators of the Supervisor Aggression–Employee Behavior Relationship**

We draw from social psychology theory and research to identify situational factors that moderate the effects of perceived supervisor aggression on employee behavioral reactions. In particular, we consider two factors that research and theory suggest influence reactions to aggression: fear of retaliation and behavioral modeling.

**Fear of retaliation.** Aggression theories suggest fear of retaliation from a harmdoer influences victims’ responses (e.g., frustration-aggression theory, Dollard et al., 1939; social learning theory, Bandura, 1973). Fear of retaliation influences reactions to
perceived aggression because of victims’ learned inhibitions (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1983; Sears, 1948). People understand the consequences of their behavior based on past experiences or by watching what happens to others. Victims who fear retaliation from a harmdoer believe aggressive responses will likely provoke further acts of aggression against them, particularly when the harmdoer has greater power (e.g., a supervisor of a subordinate; Bandura, 1973; Baron, 1971; Berkowitz, 1983; Sears, 1948). In contrast, problem solving will likely deter further harm against victims or potentially resolve the situation altogether. Consequently, victims tend to refrain from aggregating against harmdoers when they fear retaliation and, instead, tend to problem solve to try to resolve the issue.

Few studies in the organizational sciences have specifically examined fear of retaliation, but existing studies provide evidence consistent with our predictions. For example, Fox and Spector (1999) found when employees believed their organization caused them harm and they could engage in deviant behavior without penalty (i.e., no fear of retaliation), they engaged in more deviant work behavior. Similarly, Tripp and Bies’s (1997) qualitative study suggests one of the most consistent deterring factors of retaliatory behaviors among would-be avengers was fear of retaliation from the harmdoer. Research has also shown that some individuals who fear a person in authority engage in problem solving. Some victims try to talk to the offender to resolve the issue (Bies & Tripp, 1996, 1998). Others try to reconcile with the offender (Aquino et al., 2001, 2006), and others simply report the offender to authorities (Bies & Tripp, 1996).

This review suggests fear of retaliation will moderate the effects of supervisor aggression on retaliation (i.e., supervisor-directed aggression) and problem solving such that higher fear of retaliation will strengthen the effects on problem solving, but it will weaken the effects on retaliation.

**Hypothesis 2:** The positive relationship between supervisor aggression and (a) problem solving will be stronger when fear of retaliation is higher than lower, and the positive relationship between supervisor aggression and (b) retaliation will be stronger when fear of retaliation is lower than higher.

Although research shows a fairly clear influence of fear of retaliation on behavior directed at the aggressor, two primary, yet opposing, views have been proposed for its moderating effects on displaced aggression reactions to aggression: the frustration–aggression view (Dollard et al., 1939) and the learned inhibition view (Bandura, 1973; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). The frustration–agression view (Dollard et al., 1939) suggests when victims fear retaliation from an aggressor, displaced aggression is likely because it allows victims to vent hostilities without fear of recourse from the harmdoer (Dollard et al., 1939). Dollard et al. (1939) explained that displaced aggression acts as a form of catharsis, allowing victims to express their frustration behaviorally. Because fear of retaliation inhibits retaliatory reactions, victims feel the need to express their frustration by displacing aggression on other, more available targets. As previously noted, social psychology research provides evidence of these effects (see Berkowitz, 1989; Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000).

Yet, social psychologists (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) have noted the frustration-agression view of displaced aggression has not been consistently supported. The frustration-agression prediction about displaced aggression is based on the notion of catharsis (individuals releasing negative and aggressive energy without fear of future recourse). However, both Miller (1941) and Sears (1941) contended that individuals may choose not to displace aggression if learned inhibitions suggest it would be inappropriate. Similarly, Tedeschi and Felson (1994) argued that displaced aggression does not always occur because past experiences may allow individuals to discriminate when to and when not to displace aggression. These arguments are consistent with Bandura’s (1973) view that individuals refrain from destructive reactions when learned inhibitions suggest they are not appropriate. Thus, according to this perspective, the target of the displaced aggression is important. It is, then, possible for victims of supervisor aggression to not displace aggression on their peers because they understand that doing so may tarnish the relationships these victims hold with their colleagues. Additionally, employees who act aggressively toward peers (even if their acts are displaced) may be viewed by supervisors as dysfunctional work unit members, which potentially provokes the supervisor to be even more hostile toward that employee. In short, the learned inhibitions view suggests that engaging in displaced aggressive behaviors would not prove wise for someone who is the target of supervisor aggression (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994).

The frustration–agression and learned inhibitions views both provide plausible explanations for how fear of retaliation impacts the relationship between supervisor aggression and coworker displaced aggression. Consequently, we pose competing hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3(a):** According to the frustration–agression view, the positive relationship between supervisor aggression and coworker displaced aggression will be stronger when fear of retaliation is higher than lower.

**Hypothesis 3(b):** According to the learned inhibitions view, the positive relationship between supervisor aggression and coworker displaced aggression will be weaker when fear of retaliation is higher than lower.

**Behavioral modeling.** Our final hypotheses examine behavioral modeling. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973; Mischel, 1973) and social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggest individuals understand what is acceptable behavior through vicarious learning and, in particular, by observing relevant social models (e.g., coworkers, peers). Watching others engage in certain behaviors conveys that the observed behavior is acceptable and supported in the social environment, and, hence, makes individuals more inclined to engage in similar behaviors. Bandura (1973, 1986) argued that when individuals perceive relevant social models engaging in certain behavior (whether it is constructive or destructive), they view that behavior as socially appropriate. Indeed, research suggests employees learn about expected work behavior more by watching what coworkers do than by following formal rules and procedures (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

This line of reasoning suggests individuals imitate their peers’ behaviors, in a “monkey-see, monkey-do” pattern (cf. Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998). That is, employees who perceive that coworkers display aggressive behaviors will be more likely to engage
in aggressive behavior (i.e., retaliation, displaced aggression), and employees who perceive that coworkers display problem solving behaviors will be more likely to engage in problem solving. Research supports these ideas. For example, employees are more likely to react to aversive work conditions with absenteeism if behavioral norms among peers suggest permissiveness (Biron & Bamberger, 2012). Research also shows that employees’ observations of coworkers exhibiting antisocial behavior influence the employees’ own antisocial behavior (Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998). Likewise, employees who are a target of aggression, who also observe aggression by coworkers, are more likely to act aggressively (Glomb & Liao, 2003).

Similar influence is found for constructive behavior. Research has shown that employees who perceive group norms embrace cooperative and helping behavior are more likely to engage in similar behaviors (De Cremer, van Dijke, & Mayer, 2010; Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004) and that perceptions of group norms that embrace open discussion about conflict influence individuals to engage in more open discussion (Jehn, 1995). Research has also demonstrated that observations of peers’ innovative and creative behavior positively influence observers’ innovative and creative behavior (Adarves-Yorno, Postmes, & Haslam, 2007). Finally, research has also shown that problem solving behavioral modeling (perceptions of others engaging in problem solving or of behavioral norms associated with problem solving) influences the perceiver’s problem solving behavior (Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000; Taggar & Ellis, 2007).

We suggest coworkers provide a strong basis for behavioral norms, and the type of behaviors coworkers exert at work will influence victims’ reactions to supervisor aggression. Individuals who perceive their coworkers engaging in aggressive or problem solving behavior will find each type of behavior to be acceptable and supported. Consequently, when confronted with supervisor aggression, employees who perceive coworkers modeling aggressive behavior will be more inclined to engage in similar behavior (i.e., retaliation, displaced aggression) and employees who perceive coworkers modeling problem solving behavior will be more inclined to engage in problem solving. We predict

Hypothesis 4: The positive relationships between supervisor aggression and (a) retaliation and (b) coworker displaced aggression will be stronger when aggressive modeling is higher than lower, and the positive relationship between supervisor aggression and (c) problem solving will be stronger when problem solving modeling is higher than lower.

We tested the predictions in three studies. Study 1 is an experimental design. The experiment examined LOC and fear of retaliation as moderators on the effects of perceived aggression from an instructor (the in-class equivalent to workplace supervisor aggression) on two behavioral reactions: retaliation and displaced aggression. Study 2 is a cross-sectional field survey design that examines the moderating effects of LOC, fear of retaliation, and aggressive modeling on retaliation, coworker displaced aggression, and general problem solving reactions to supervisor aggression. Study 3 is a time-separated field survey study that provides a test of all of our predictions and investigates the effects of supervisor aggression not only on retaliation and coworker displaced aggression reactions but also on specific forms of problem solving (i.e., seeking social support from coworkers, reconciling with the supervisor, and reporting the supervisor to authorities).

Study 1 Method

Participants and Study Design

Participants were undergraduate students from a large southeastern university. The experiment was masked within the course curriculum of eight business classes, and the experimental experience was used as a learning exercise in class. At the beginning of the semester, students were given an informed consent and a personality survey. The researcher explained that the personality survey and other class activities would be used for research, with the student’s consent. Of the 273 students who initially consented, 242 participated in the study; 31 students were either absent or late to class the day of the experiment. To maintain the integrity of the experiment, late students could not enter the classroom until the debriefing. Participants were on average 23.3 years old (SD = 5.52); 43.2% were female and 61.2% were White (10.6% were Black; 13.9% were Hispanic). A 2 × 2 (aggression high/low; fear of retaliation high/low) design was used. Participants were randomly assigned to each condition. Approximately an equal number of participants were in each condition.

Procedure

The experiment took place the week the course’s first graded assignment was to be distributed to students. The day of the experiment, after students were seated for class, a confederate entered the classroom. The confederate explained that the instructor could not make it to class that day. However, the instructor asked the confederate to come to the class to pass out the students’ graded assignments and ask them to complete a team evaluation form. In addition, the confederate explained that she or he was also there on behalf of the management department, which was conducting a midyear check on the department’s services and instructors. The confederate read and distributed a letter by the management department chair, asking the students to help by completing an instructor evaluation and a short management department services survey.2

The confederate first distributed the graded assignments. Aggression was manipulated with instructor comments written on the graded assignments. Pretesting provided a pool of eight high-

2 The graded assignment that was distributed to students by the confederate was an independent student assignment that was required for the course. Students expected to receive their graded assignments that particular day in class. The course also required students to work in a team throughout the semester, and, consequently, the instructor had teams routinely complete team evaluations. We used the same team evaluation form in the experiment. Therefore, receiving the feedback on the graded assignment and having students complete a team evaluation was not unusual for the students. Additionally, the letter by the chair of the management department explaining the midsemester instructor and departmental evaluation was signed by the actual chair of the management department of this university. These situational aspects enhanced experimental realism for the students.
aggression comments and eight low-aggression comments. Three high-aggression comments (e.g., “I’m not impressed—maybe it’s your lack of talent”) or four low-aggression comments (e.g., “Average”) were written throughout the assignment, depending on the condition (high/low). The four comments were randomly selected from the set of eight to ensure not every graded assignment had the exact same comments, thereby enhancing the manipulation’s realism.

Ten minutes after the assignments were distributed, the confederate collected them and passed out the instructor evaluation (i.e., retaliation assessment) and team peer evaluation forms (i.e., displaced aggression assessment). The fear of retaliation manipulation was set up at this time. Students in the high fear of retaliation condition were instructed to write their name on the instructor evaluation form. Further, students were given a letter from the department chair; the confederate told them, “This letter is from the department chair, explaining that your instructor will receive a copy of your evaluation within the next day or so.” Students in the low fear of retaliation condition did not write their name on the form and were given a different letter from the department chair. The confederate explained, “This letter is from the department chair, assuring you that your instructor will never see your completed evaluations—only administration will see your responses.” Instructor and peer evaluation forms were coded to match participants’ responses.

Following the instructor and team evaluations, participants received the department evaluation (i.e., manipulation checks assessment). Once completed, the confederate thanked them for their time, asked them to wait one minute more, and left the room. The confederate reentered the room with the instructor and began the debriefing. The confederate followed standard protocol and convention for debriefing participants in experiments using deception: Participants were informed about the true nature of the experiment and informed about the use of deception and why deception was needed. Continued discussion was provided to minimize negative feelings and emphasize the applicability of the activity to a work situation (Greenberg & Folger, 1988). In particular, the confederate gently approached the topic by thanking the students for completing the evaluations and surveys and asked them if they had any concerns regarding the activities for the day or any disbelief about the activities or the procedures. None of the students indicated suspicion. The confederate then explained the true nature of the experiment and explained that none of the comments written on the assignments reflected the instructor’s thoughts or feelings. The confederate informed the students that they had experienced an active learning exercise about workplace aggression and apologized for using deception, explaining that doing so was important to invoke true reactions associated with the phenomenon. As the debriefing continued, the confederate and instructor used the activity to highlight the applicability of the course material on workplace aggression. Students engaged in lively discussions and talked about incidents of aggression that they had either experienced or witnessed from an authority figure. The confederate and instructor facilitated discussions on how students should deal with these situations effectively and constructively.

3 Consistent with the literature (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; D. Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996; Porath & Erez, 2007; Sinaceur, Van Kleef, Neale, Adam, & Haag, 2011), aggression was manipulated by providing participants negative and insulting feedback. A pilot study was conducted to identify high and low aggressive instructor comments for the aggression manipulation. Participants were drawn from the same population as in the main study. Students were asked to imagine they had received the listed comments from an instructor on a graded assignment. They were asked to rate the comments on a 7-point scale in terms of their constructiveness (defined as statements that are helpful, considerate, supportive, and provide useful feedback on your work) or destructiveness (defined as statements that are discouraging, threatening, pessimistic, and might be viewed as a personal attack; 1 = very constructive, 4 = neutral [neither constructive nor destructive], 7 = destructive). Eight high aggression comments (“This answer is a joke,” “My 3-year-old niece could have written a better answer,” “Could you have written about any more nonsense,” “I can’t believe you think this is college level work,” “This is simply moronic,” “Is this your answer?” “I don’t see a career in management,” “I’m not impressed—maybe it’s your lack of talent”) and eight low aggression comments (“Ok,” “Suitable,” “Adequate,” “Alright,” “Fine,” “Average,” “Sufficient,” and a check mark [√]) were produced.

4 A second pilot test was conducted to test the perceived aggression and fear of retaliation manipulations. Participants were drawn from the same population as in the main study. First, to assess the perceived aggressiveness of the comments, the students were asked to imagine they had received a graded assignment from an instructor; looking through it, they noticed a variety of instructor comments. Four randomly selected comments for each condition (high and low aggression) were listed, and participants were asked to reflect on the comments and respond to questions that served as a manipulation check for the aggressiveness of the comments. Second, as a test of the fear of retaliation manipulation, participants were asked to imagine that after receiving the assignment, they were asked to evaluate the instructor’s performance. The high fear of retaliation condition instructions indicated students were required to write their name and the instructor’s name on their evaluation form. The low fear of retaliation condition instructions indicated the evaluation would be for administrative purposes only and the instructor would never see the student’s responses. Participants then responded to questions that serve as a manipulation check for fear of retaliation. The results indicated participants rated the comments as less aggressive in the low aggression condition than the high aggression condition (M = 3.43 vs. 5.81; F = 84.09, p < .001), and perceptions of fear of retaliation were lower in the low fear of retaliation condition than the high fear of retaliation condition (M = 2.08 vs. 4.55; F = 69.57, p < .001).

Beyond the careful debriefing protocol, we took care to design the experiment to deal with the use of deception. For example, the researchers maintained contact with the course instructors to ensure that the students and the instructor/student relationships were continuing normally. Additionally, no students reported discomfort or anything associated with the experimental activity to the university’s institutional review board, administration, the instructor, or the researchers. Last, as a safeguard for the instructors, the researchers placed a letter in each instructor’s personnel file, indicating that an experimental activity on workplace aggression occurred in the class for academic and learning purposes and that if an instructor had received uncharacteristically low evaluation scores, it might be the consequence of the activity. None of the participating instructors received poor end-of-the-year evaluation scores.

6 To further assess whether students were suspicious about the experiment, we evaluated answers in an open-ended question, embedded in the post-experimental questionnaire (i.e., the departmental services survey). In particular, students were asked to indicate whether they had discussed the questionnaire they completed that day with anyone prior to entering the classroom or whether they had any concerns regarding doing so. None of the students indicated that they had heard about the exercise or found the procedures or evaluations to be suspect. Additionally, neither during the experimental activity nor during our debriefing discussions did students indicate suspicion.
Measures

Reactions to perceived aggression. Consistent with the literature (e.g., DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001), retaliation and displaced aggression were assessed by asking participants to evaluate the performance of the focal target (i.e., the instructor’s performance for retaliation, team’s performance for displaced aggression), with poor evaluation scores reflecting an aggressive reaction. Retaliation was assessed with a 20-item instructor evaluation that was used to assess instructor class performance at this university (e.g., “The instructor’s use of class time,” “The instructor’s organization for the course”). Students rated the instructor on a 5-point scale (1 = excellent, 5 = poor). Displaced aggression was assessed with a 10-item team evaluation form that was used in the course throughout the semester (e.g., “The team’s work is of high quality,” “Members contribute equally to team assignments”). Students rated their team on a 5-point scale (1 = all the time, 5 = never).

LOC. LOC was assessed with the 10-item Interpersonal LOC subscale of the Spheres of Control measure (Paulhus, 1983). Participants rated their expectations of outcomes in interpersonal situations (e.g., “I can usually achieve what I want if I work hard for it,” “I can learn almost anything if I set my mind to it”) on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). High scores indicate an internal LOC.

Controls. Research suggests outcomes influence reactions to mistreatment (Greenberg, 1993). Thus, grades were not manipulated; grades written on the assignment were the grades students received. Further, grades were controlled for in the analysis using a 100-point scale. Because different instructors’ classes were used, instructors were coded and controlled for in the analysis.

Manipulation checks. The manipulation checks were embedded in the management department services questionnaire. A five-item perceived aggression manipulation check asked students to evaluate their last graded assignment (“I felt that the comments written by the instructor were highly insensitive”; α = .91). A four-item fear of retaliation manipulation check asked respondents to rate the procedure for the instructor evaluation (“I was fearful that my instructor would get back at me in some way in the future,” “I can learn almost anything if I set my mind to it,” “I can usually achieve what I want if I work hard for it,” “The team’s work is of high quality,” “The team’s work is of high quality”). Students rated responses on a 5-point Likert-like scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Study 1 Results

Manipulation Checks

The manipulation checks showed the experimental conditions had the intended effects. Perceptions of aggression were lower in the low aggression condition than the high aggression condition (M = 2.25 vs. 3.96; F = 227.69, p < .001); perceptions of fear of retaliation were lower in the low fear of retaliation condition than the high fear of retaliation condition (M = 1.44 vs. 3.08; F = 247.36, p < .001).

Hypotheses Testing

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients for the study’s variables. Table 2 displays the moderated multiple regression results. Study 1’s design allowed for only a test of predictions for the moderating effects of LOC and fear of retaliation on retaliation and displaced aggression; effects for behavioral modeling and those on problem solving behavior were not tested. The measured variable, LOC, was mean centered to assist in the interpretation of the interactions, and significant interactions were plotted and tested at one standard deviation above and below the mean (J. Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken 2003).

Hypothesis 1 predicts lower LOC will strengthen the effects of perceived aggression on (H1b) retaliation and (H1c) displaced aggression. The interaction was significant on retaliation but not on displaced aggression. Consistent with expectations, the plot in Figure 1 shows the effects on retaliation were stronger when LOC was lower (b = .87, p < .001) than higher (b = .45, p < .01). The results support the prediction for retaliation (H1b) but not for displaced aggression (H1c).

Hypothesis 2 predicts lower fear of retaliation will strengthen the relationship between aggression and retaliation (H2b). Table 2 shows the interaction was significant. Table 3 reports the means and standard deviations for the aggression and fear of retaliation manipulations. Figure 2 depicts the effects and shows the mean of...
the high aggression/low fear of retaliation condition was significantly different from all other categories \((p < .001)\) and that none of the other conditions were significantly different from one another, supporting Hypothesis 2b.

Hypothesis 3a and 3b reflect competing predictions for the effects of fear of retaliation on the positive relationship between aggression and displaced aggression. The frustration–aggression view (H3a) suggests fear of retaliation will strengthen the effects, and the learned inhibitions view (H3b) suggests fear of retaliation will weaken the effects. The interaction was not significant on displaced aggression, and, thus, neither view was supported in Study 1.

Study 1 Discussion

Our purpose in Study 1 was to examine, within an experimental setting, the moderating effects of LOC and fear of retaliation on retaliatory and displaced aggression reactions to perceived aggression. The results support our predictions for retaliation but not for displaced aggression. For retaliation, the effects of perceived aggression (i.e., aggressive instructor comments) were stronger when LOC was lower than higher and when fear of retaliation was lower than higher. The findings support the notion that externals (low LOC individuals), guided by futility beliefs, see less opportunity to control the threat (i.e., instructor), which prompts destructive reactions (i.e., retaliation). Also consistent with our theorizing, the effects of perceived aggression were stronger when fear of retaliation was lower than higher; participants retaliated more when they did not believe their instructor would know what they wrote.

In contrast to the results for retaliation, no significant effects were found for displaced aggression. We argued low LOC would strengthen aggressive reactions to perceived aggression (Deci & Ryan, 1980), and we presented opposing predictions for the effects of fear of retaliation. Based on the frustration–aggression view (Dollard et al., 1939), fear of retaliation would strengthen displaced aggression reactions to perceived aggression, and based on the learned inhibitions view (Bandura, 1973; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), fear of retaliation would weaken those reactions. However, neither the LOC nor the fear of retaliation interaction was significant. The lack of results may be a consequence of the target of

Note. Within each row and column, means sharing a subscript do not differ from one another; those with different subscripts are different from one another.

Table 3

Study 1 Means and Standard Deviations of Aggression as a Function of Fear of Retaliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Low fear of retaliation</th>
<th>High fear of retaliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low aggression</td>
<td>2.52a</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High aggression</td>
<td>3.19b</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Within each row and column, means sharing a subscript do not differ from one another; those with different subscripts are different from one another.

Figure 1. Study 1 Aggression \(\times\) Locus of Control interaction on retaliation.

Figure 2. Study 1 Aggression \(\times\) Fear of Retaliation interaction on retaliation.
displaced aggression (team members). Team members are individuals with whom students had ongoing and interdependent relations and on whom they had to rely on for future class activities. Indeed, the learned inhibitions view would suggest students should discern to whom and when to displace aggression (Bandura, 1973; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Thus, it is possible students understood that displacing aggression against their peers might tarnish the relationships they held with their team members. Students may also have believed their displaced aggression might further provoke the aggressor (i.e., the instructor). Alternatively, the lack of results may be a consequence of our displaced aggression measure, as we used a team evaluation and did not ask about aggression directed against specific targets.

Study 1’s experimental design offers a number of strengths, such as the allowance of greater control, enhanced internal validity, and the ability to draw causal conclusions. The design also provides behavioral, rather than self-report, indicators of retaliation and displaced aggression. Still, this approach has limitations. First, not all predictions could be tested. Second, although we tried to maximize the realism of the experiment, the examination of the hypothesized relationships in an experimental setting with students raises concerns about the generalizability of the results. There are differences in the nature of the relationship between an instructor and student, compared to a supervisor and subordinate. For instance, students are typically in a relationship with their instructor for only one class and one semester. In contrast, subordinates have ongoing relationships with their supervisors and typically have only one supervisor. Further, the extent to which an instructor can exert power over a student may be different than the extent to which a supervisor can exert power over a subordinate. Thus, two complementary field studies were designed to examine our predictions and test the generalizability of Study 1’s findings.

Study 2 Method

Sample and Procedure

Surveys were distributed to individuals randomly selected and called to jury duty by a southeastern U.S. county circuit court. Jurors were addressed before they were called to serve. The researchers explained the purpose of the study and emphasized that the survey had nothing to do with jury duty or the court system. Interested participants picked up surveys from and returned surveys to the researcher. Over four weeks, 321 individuals participated in the study (29% response rate). The final sample of 278 observations included participants who worked with coworkers and who had complete data for our study’s variables. On average, participants were 42.8 years old (SD = 12.2) and their company tenure was 8.4 years (SD = 7.9); 49.4% were managers, 47.2% were female, and 70.6% were White (13.2% were Hispanic, 8.6% were Black).

Measures

Supervisor aggression. Supervisor aggression was assessed with Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) five-item version of Tepper’s (2000) measure, which assesses active (versus passive) supervisor aggression (e.g., “My boss ridiculed me,” “My boss put me down in front of others”). Participants rated the frequency they experienced the behavior on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = daily).

Moderator variables. The measure for LOC described in Study 1 was also used in Study 2. Fear of retaliation was assessed with Fox and Spector’s (1999) three-item fear of future punishments measure. Instructions were adapted to asked participants to rate perceptions about their immediate supervisor (vs. their organization) on a 7-point Likert-like scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; “I am afraid of reacting against my supervisor for fear of future punishments.” “I would not act out against my supervisor because s/he would retaliate against me,” and “I would not do something against my supervisor because s/he would get back at me in some way”). Consistent with the literature (e.g., Aquino & Douglas, 2003), coworker aggressive modeling was assessed with Robinson and O’Leary-Kelly’s (1998) nine-item antisocial behavior scale. Respondents rated the frequency of observed coworkers being aggressive on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = 10 or more times; e.g., “Damage property belonging to the organization.” “Started an argument with someone at work”).

Dependent variables. Retaliation was assessed with Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) 10-item supervisor-directed deviance measure (e.g., “Sware at my supervisor,” “Refused to talk to my supervisor”). Coworker displaced aggression was assessed by adapting Bennett and Robinson’s (2000) seven-item interpersonal deviance measure to focus on behaviors intentionally aimed at coworkers (e.g., “Made an obscene comment or gesture toward a coworker,” “Publicly embarrassed a coworker”). Problem solving was assessed with eight items adapted from Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous’ (1988) Voice and Tepper et al.’s (2001) Constructive Resistance measures (“Asked coworkers for advice about what to do,” “Tried to reconcile with the person I was having trouble with,” “Discussed the problem with your immediate supervisor,” “Tried to change the situation to benefit all parties involved,” “Asked the person to clarify the problem,” “Discussed with the office manager the situation,” Asked the person for more explanation about the problem,” and “Tried to convince the person to reassess the problem”). For all dependent variables, respondents rated the behaviors on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = daily).

Controls. Research shows aggression promotes aggression (see Anderson & Bushman, 2002, for a review); because we examine coworker displaced aggression, we controlled for perceived coworker aggression in the analysis, with adapted items from Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) five-item abusive supervision measure and three items from the Workplace Aggression Questionnaire (WAQ; Schat et al., 2005). Further, consistent with aggression research (e.g., Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), we controlled for trait anger (with Buss & Perry’s 1992 seven-item anger

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注释:

7 The adapted problem solving measure was pretested on a separate sample of participants from the same population as in Study 2 (N = 62). Exploratory factor analysis, using principal- axis factoring, shows the items loaded on one factor (eigenvalue = 6.03). The measure demonstrated acceptable psychometric standards (alpha = .95; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Measures of coworker aggression were pretested on a separate sample from the same population as in Study 2 (N = 85). Exploratory factor analysis, using principal- axis factoring, shows the items loaded on one factor (eigenvalue = 5.60) and the measure demonstrated acceptable psychometric standards (coworker aggression alpha = .94; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).
subscale of the Aggression Questionnaire), social desirability (with Paulhus’ 1991 18-item measure), and participants’ tenure with their supervisor (in years). Last, Aquino and colleagues’ (e.g., Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Aquino, Galperin, & Bennett, 2004) demonstrated that social status variables (e.g., gender, race, position in the company) influence aggressive behavior, and so we controlled for respondents’ gender (0 = female, 1 = male), race (0 = White, 1 = non-White), and position (0 = non-management, 1 = management).

**Study 2 Results**

Table 4 provides the descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients for Study 2’s variables. The measures displayed acceptable reliabilities. Table 5 displays the moderated multiple regression results. As with Study 1, predictor variables were mean centered and significant interactions were plotted and tested at one standard deviation above and below the mean (J. Cohen et al., 2003).

Hypothesis 1 predicts higher LOC will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H1a) problem solving, and lower LOC will strengthen the effects of supervisor aggression on (H1b) retaliation and (H1c) displaced aggression. The interaction was significant on retaliation but not on problem solving or coworker displaced aggression. The plot shows the effects on retaliation (see Figure 3) were stronger when LOC was lower (b = .30, p < .001) than higher (b = .14, p < .01). The results support H1b but not H1a or H1c.

Hypothesis 2 predicts higher fear of retaliation will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H2a) problem solving and lower fear of retaliation will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H2b) retaliation. The interaction was significant on problem solving and retaliation. Supporting H2a and H2b, the effects were stronger on problem solving (see Figure 4) when fear of retaliation was higher (b = .23, p < .05) than lower (b = .03, ns) and on retaliation (see Figure 5) when fear of retaliation was lower (b = .33, p < .001) than higher (b = .11, p < .01).

Hypothesis 3 presents competing predictions about how fear of retaliation will impact coworker displaced aggression reactions to supervisor aggression. The frustration–aggression view (H3a) predicts higher fear of retaliation will strengthen the positive relationship; the learned inhibitions view (H3b) predicts higher fear of retaliation will weaken the positive relationship. The interaction was significant, and the plot (see Figure 6) supports the learned inhibitions view (H3b). The positive relationship between supervisor aggression and displaced aggression was weaker when fear of retaliation was higher (b = .13, p < .05) than lower (b = .13, p < .05). In fact, the relationship was negative when fear of retaliation was higher than lower.

Hypothesis 4 predicts behavioral modeling will impact the effects of supervisor aggression on our dependent variables. Study 2 tests only the aggressive modeling predictions, which suggest aggressive modeling will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H4a) retaliation and (H4b) coworker displaced aggression. The interaction was significant on both dependent variables, and the plots support our predictions. Both retaliation (see Figure 7) and coworker displaced aggression (see Figure 8) were stronger when aggressive modeling was higher (b = .32, p < .001 for retaliation; b = .13, p < .05 for coworker displaced aggression) than lower (b = .12, p < .01 for retaliation; b = −.13, p < .05 for coworker displaced aggression).

**Study 2 Discussion**

Study 2 complements Study 1 by investigating the predictions with working adults. We tested the moderating effects of LOC, fear of retaliation, and aggressive modeling on the relationships among supervisor aggression and retaliation, coworker displaced aggression, and problem solving. Study 2’s findings are consistent with Study 1 with regard to the effects on retaliation. That is, LOC and fear of retaliation moderated the effects, such that lower LOC and lower fear of retaliation strengthened retaliatory reactions to supervisor aggression.

The other findings from Study 2 were also revealing. For example, although LOC significantly moderated the effects of super-

**Table 4**

| Study 2 Summary of Descriptive Statistics and Correlations |
|-----------------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Variable                    | M   | SD  | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   | 9   | 10  | 11  |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. Supervisor aggression    | 1.47| .91 | .90 | .73 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 |
| 2. Locus of control         | 5.62| .76 | .06 | .73 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 |
| 3. Fear of retaliation      | 2.95| 1.99| .17 | .22 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 | .90 |
| 4. Coworker aggressive model| 2.33| 1.03| .40 | .05 | .18 | .92 | .92 | .92 | .92 | .92 | .92 | .92 | .92 | .92 |
| 5. Retaliation               | 1.43| 0.66| .61 | .10 | .45 | .84 | .84 | .84 | .84 | .84 | .84 | .84 | .84 | .84 |
| 6. Coworker displaced aggrv  | 1.79| 0.81| .40 | .06 | .44 | .85 | .85 | .85 | .85 | .85 | .85 | .85 | .85 | .85 |
| 7. Problem solving          | 2.87| 1.33| .24 | .06 | .27 | .93 | .93 | .93 | .93 | .93 | .93 | .93 | .93 | .93 |
| 8. Gender (0 = female)       | 0.53| 0.50| .11 | .02 | .13 | .21 | .21 | .21 | .21 | .21 | .21 | .21 | .21 | .21 |
| 9. Race (0 = White)          | 0.71| 0.46| .00 | .11 | .05 | .05 | .05 | .05 | .05 | .05 | .05 | .05 | .05 | .05 |
| 10. Position (0 = non-management) | 0.50| 0.50| .01 | .18 | .05 | .11 | .06 | .05 | .20 | .17 | .15 | .15 | .15 | .15 |
| 11. Tenure with the supervisor | 3.63| 4.44| .06 | .05 | .01 | .02 | .07 | .12 | .03 | .07 | .13 | .19 | .19 | .19 |
| 12. Social desirability      | 2.63| 0.57| .15 | .07 | .25 | .45 | .45 | .45 | .45 | .45 | .45 | .45 | .45 | .45 |
| 13. Trait anger              | 1.99| 0.70| .14 | .05 | .22 | .05 | .31 | .28 | .05 | .08 | .00 | .01 | .04 | .30 |
| 14. Coworker aggression      | 1.74| 0.90| .59 | .07 | .50 | .18 | .56 | .51 | .27 | .03 | .02 | .00 | .07 | .22 |

*Note.* Correlations greater than |1.44| are significant at p < .01 and those greater than |1.41| are significant at p < .05, two-tailed. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients are reported on the diagonal for measured variables.
visor aggression on retaliation, it did not influence the relationship between supervisor aggression and problem solving or coworker displaced aggression. Theory about LOC suggests externals do not believe they can exact change when they face threats (i.e., supervisor aggression), which motivates them to react destructively. Yet, the results of Study 2 (and Study 1) for LOC suggest individuals may gauge the usefulness of engaging in problem solving and certain destructive reactions. It is possible that internals may not engage in problem solving if they do not believe the behaviors are possible or available to them within their work setting. Further, victims may also believe displacing aggression might ruin relationships with peers, making the situation even more taxing. This line of reasoning suggests victims’ behavioral tendencies with regard to LOC may be more nuanced than previous research suggests.

The results for the moderating effects of fear of retaliation supported the learned inhibitions view (Bandura, 1973; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). A higher fear of retaliation inhibited destructive reactions and enhanced constructive reactions to supervisor aggression. The relationships between supervisor aggression and both forms of aggressive reactions (retaliation and coworker displaced aggression) were stronger when fear of retaliation was lower than higher, and the relationship between supervisor aggression and problem solving was stronger when fear of retaliation was higher than lower. The results suggest fearing retaliation from an aggressive supervisor creates a situation that motivates individuals to not aggress outwardly at work and, instead, to try to find a resolution to the problem. Notably, the results did not support the frustration-aggression view of displaced aggression; the high fear of retaliation slope was significant and negative, meaning victims were less likely to vent their hostilities on coworkers and were not overcome by catharsis.

![Figure 3](image1.png)

**Figure 3.** Study 2 Supervisor Aggression × Locus of Control interaction on retaliation.

![Figure 4](image2.png)

**Figure 4.** Study 2 Supervisor Aggression × Fear of Retaliation interaction on problem solving.

### Table 5

**Study 2 Multiple Regressions for Hypothesized Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Retaliation</th>
<th>Coworker displaced aggression</th>
<th>Problem solving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (0 = female)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.12***</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (0 = White)</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>−.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position (0 = non-management)</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.21***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure with the supervisor</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social desirability</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait anger</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>−.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworker aggression</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictors</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor aggression</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of control</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of retaliation</td>
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<td>.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.17***</td>
<td>.18***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervisor Aggression × Locus of Control</td>
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<td>.05</td>
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<td>Supervisor Aggression × Fear of Retaliation</td>
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<td>−.17***</td>
<td>.11*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervisor Aggression × Coworker Aggressive Modeling</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.63</td>
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<td>.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
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<td>.51</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>31.48***</td>
<td>21.88***</td>
<td>31.48***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* For all dependent variables, $N = 278$. Standardized beta coefficients are reported.

* $p < .05$, one-tailed.  ** $p < .01$, one-tailed.  *** $p < .001$, one-tailed.
Last, Study 2 provides a test of the aggressive modeling predictions and shows that when victims perceived more (rather than less) aggressive modeling from coworkers, they were more inclined to respond to supervisor aggression with aggression. The positive relationship between supervisor aggression and both retaliation and coworker displaced aggression was stronger when coworker aggressive modeling was higher than lower. When provoked by an aggressive supervisor, victims imitate the behaviors of their coworkers; they believe such aggressive behaviors are acceptable within the work environment.

Study 2 has notable strengths. It examines the hypotheses in a diverse, randomly selected sample. Additionally, it replicates the moderating effects of LOC and fear of retaliation on the relationship between supervisor aggression and retaliation, which were found in the experiment, addressing issues of generalizability. However, it too has limitations. First, Study 2’s data were collected from a single source at a single point in time, increasing the potential for common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Second, Study 2 did not allow for a test of all of our predictions; the effects of problem solving modeling on problem solving reactions to supervisor aggression were not tested. Last, it is possible that not all of our respondents were able to engage in the problem solving behaviors assessed (e.g., report the supervisor to a higher authority), as we did not ask participants if these paths of recourse were available to them. Study 3 was designed to address these issues. We used a time-separated data collection design for Study 3, where the predictor and moderator variables were collected at Time 1 and dependent variables were collected at Time 2. Second, we assessed problem solving modeling, allowing for an examination of all of our hypotheses. Finally, in Study 3, we examined a range of problem solving behaviors (seeking social support from coworkers, trying to reconcile with the supervisor, and reporting the aggressive supervisor to authorities), and we asked respondents to indicate whether they had the opportunity to engage in the listed problem solving behaviors.

**Study 3 Method**

**Sample and Procedure**

Data were collected from individuals working in full-time positions from various organizations located in the southeastern U.S. in industries including finance, insurance, education, health care, information technology, and retail. Surveys were administered via
the Internet. Business administration students were asked to serve as organizational contacts for course credit. The researchers asked students to recruit up to two full-time working adults who worked with coworkers to complete two surveys, which would be separated by approximately three weeks. This data collection technique has been used successfully by a variety of researchers (e.g., De Cremer et al., 2010; Grant & Mayer, 2009; Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012).

We received contact information for 674 potential study participants. From these, 371 individuals participated in the Time 1 survey (55% response rate). At Time 1, participants were asked about supervisor aggression, locus of control, fear of retaliation, aggressive modeling, problem solving modeling, and demographics. At Time 2, participants were asked about their behaviors (retaliation, coworker displaced aggression, seeking social support, and reconciling with and reporting the supervisor). Of the 298 individuals who participated in the Time 2 survey, the final sample was limited to 243 individuals, who had complete data for our study’s variables and were verified to work with coworkers. On average, participants were 41.1 years old (SD = 13.7) and their company tenure was 8.7 years (SD = 8.9); 43.1% were managers, 57.8% were female, and 86% were White (7.1% were Hispanic, 1.6% were Black).

Measures

**Supervisor aggression.** The measure described in Study 2 was also used in Study 3.

**Moderator variables.** The measures of LOC, fear of retaliation, and coworker aggressive modeling described in Study 2 were used in Study 3. For problem solving modeling, we adapted the problem solving behavior measure from Study 2 and asked respondents to rate how often they observed coworkers engaging in the listed behaviors on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = always; e.g., “Ask for advice about the problem,” “Tried to change the situation to benefit all parties involved”).

**Dependent variables.** The measures of retaliation and coworker displaced aggression described in Study 2 were also used in Study 3. We assessed three forms of problem solving: seeking coworker social support, reconciling with the supervisor, and reporting to authorities. Seeking coworker social support was measured with three items from Westring and Ryan’s (2010) measure (“Asked for emotional support,” “Sought help on how to handle the conflict and problem,” and “Got advice on how to sort out the situation”). Reconciling with the supervisor was measured with two items from Wade’s (1989) reconciliation subscale (“I made an effort to be more concerned” and “I tried to reconcile the situation with the supervisor”). Reporting the supervisor to authorities was measured with five items (“Reported the issue to the office manager or Human Resource representative,” “Discussed the situation with someone in a managerial position,” “Reported the issue to someone in authority to resolve the issue,” “Discussed with the office manager how you felt about the situation,” and “Asked someone in authority to directly help you resolve the situation”). For all problem solving measures, participants were asked whether the problem solving behaviors were available to them in their work environment; the analyses included data only for those who indicated the problem solving behavior was available. Respondents rated the frequency they engaged in the stated behaviors on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = always) for all dependent variables.

**Controls.** The control variables used in Study 2 were included in our Study 3 analyses. We also controlled for the trait emotional stability, using Saucier’s (1997) 10-item measure, as this is a trait that impacts both constructive and destructive behavior (see Perrewé & Spector, 2002).

### Study 3 Results

Table 6 provides the descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients for the Study 3 variables. The measures displayed acceptable reliabilities. We followed the analytic procedures described in Study 2. Table 7 displays the multiple moderated regression results.

Hypothesis 1 predicts higher LOC will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H1a) problem solving and lower LOC will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H1b) retaliation and (H1c) displaced aggression. The interaction was significant on two problem solving behaviors (reconciling and reporting to authorities), retaliation, and coworker displaced aggression but not on seeking coworker social support. Thus, H1a was primarily supported. The plots support H1a for reconciling (see Figure 9) and reporting to authorities (see Figure 10), H1b for retaliation (see Figure 11), and H1c for coworker displaced aggression (see Figure 12). The effects of supervisor aggression were stronger on both reconciling and reporting to authorities when LOC was higher (b = .22, p < .001 for reconciling; b = .23, p < .05 for reporting to authorities) than lower (b = −.16, ns for reconciling; b = −.05, ns for reporting to authorities). Further, the effects of supervisor aggression were stronger on both retaliation and coworker displaced aggression when LOC was lower (b = .23, p < .001 for retaliation; b = .20, p < .01 for coworker displaced aggression) than higher (b = .03, ns for retaliation; b = .01, ns for coworker displaced aggression).

Hypothesis 2 predicts higher fear of retaliation will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H2a) problem solving and lower fear of retaliation will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H2b) retaliation. The interaction was significant on retaliation but not on the forms of problem solving. The plot for retaliation (see Figure 13) shows the relationship between supervisor aggression and retaliation was stronger when fear of retaliation was lower (b = .21, p < .05) than higher (b = .05, ns). The results support H2b but not H2a.

Hypothesis 3 presents competing predictions about how fear of retaliation will impact coworker displaced aggression reactions to supervisor aggression. The frustration–aggression view (H3a) predicts higher fear of retaliation will strengthen the positive effects; the learned inhibitions view (H3b) predicts higher fear of retaliation will weaken the effects. The interaction was significant, and the plot (see Figure 14) supports the learned inhibitions view (H3b); the effects were weaker when fear of retaliation was higher (b = −.02, ns) than lower (b = −.24, p < .001).

Hypothesis 4 predicts aggressive modeling will strengthen the positive effects of supervisor aggression on (H4a) retaliation and 

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9 Items were constructed based on qualitative evidence presented in prior research (cf. Bies & Tripp, 1996).
(H4b) coworker displaced aggression and problem solving modeling will strengthen the effects of supervisor aggression on (H4c) problem solving. The interactions were significant for retaliation, coworker displaced aggression, and seeking coworker social support but not for reconciling or reporting to authorities. As predicted, the plots show that the effects for retaliation (see Figure 15) and aggressive modeling were stronger when higher fear of retaliation weakened the relationship between supervisor aggression and both retaliation and destructive reactions, higher fear of retaliation weakened the relationship between supervisor aggression and both retaliation and destructive reactions, and a higher LOC strengthened the positive effects of supervisor aggression on retaliation. Thus, the results for the behavioral modeling predictions are stronger than results that only included some of the problem solving variables, and the effects on seeking social support (see Figure 17) were stronger when problem solving modeling was higher (b = .22, p < .05) than lower (b = .04, ns for retaliation; b = .04, ns for coworker displaced aggression), and the effects on seeking social support (see Figure 17) were stronger when problem solving modeling was higher (b = .22, p < .05) than lower (b = .04, ns). The results support H4a and H4b and provide partial support for H4c.

Study 3 Discussion

Our purpose in Study 3 was to provide a test of all predictions, examine the generalizability of Study 1, and complement Study 2’s design. All of the predicted effects for retaliation and coworker displaced aggression were supported in Study 3, but only some of the predictions for problem solving were supported. The differential effects for our moderators on problem solving may be a factor of the distinct forms of problem solving we assessed. We expand on these ideas below and discuss each of our predictions in turn.

The results support our LOC predictions for destructive reactions and for two forms of problem solving behavior. A lower LOC strengthened the positive effects of supervisor aggression on retaliation and displaced aggression, and a higher LOC strengthened the effects on reconciling with and reporting the supervisor to authorities. Interestingly, LOC did not moderate the effects on seeking social support problem solving. This result may indicate that more discriminative in how they problem solve. Both reconciling with and reporting the supervisor allow internals to try directly resolve the problem. In contrast, seeking coworkers’ social support involves victims leaning on others for consolation. This behavior is a less direct approach to addressing the problem, relies on others rather than oneself, and may not result in action directed at the problem. The correlations between LOC and the problem solving behaviors support these arguments. LOC was positively related to reconciling with and reporting the supervisor, but it was negatively correlated with seeking coworker social support. These correlations suggest internals are more likely to engage in more proactive, independent problem solving behaviors (i.e., reconciling, reporting the supervisor) and less likely to engage in problem solving behavior (i.e., seeking coworker social support).

The results also support the learned inhibition view of fear of retaliation (Bandura, 1973; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). For the destructive reactions, higher fear of retaliation weakened the relationship between supervisor aggression and both retaliation and coworker displaced aggression. Hence, victims’ learned inhibition allowed them to understand that acting aggressively—whether against the supervisor or coworkers—would likely make their situation worse.

Last, the results for the behavioral modeling predictions are supported for aggressive modeling but are only partially supported for problem solving modeling. The effects of supervisor aggression on retaliation and coworker displaced aggression were stron-
ger when coworker aggressive modeling was higher than lower, and the effects of supervisor aggression on seeking coworker social support were stronger when problem solving modeling was higher than lower. The pattern of these interactions shows coworker modeling impacts employees’ reactions to supervisor aggression in a “monkey-see, monkey-do” pattern (cf. Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998). Yet, the influence of coworker modeling is not found for reconciling with and reporting the supervisor problem solving. Thus, it appears aggressive modeling led to more generalized behavior (aggression targeted at supervisors and aggression targeted at coworkers) than did problem solving. For problem solving modeling, victims target problem solving reactions toward the source of the behavioral modeling (i.e., coworkers). It appears employees engage in problem solving (i.e. support seeking) that is likely to be favorably received by the model.

**General Discussion**

Together, the results of our three studies provide useful insights about employees’ reactions to supervisor aggression (see the Appendix for a summary of the findings across the three studies). Consistent patterns emerged for the moderating effects of LOC, fear of retaliation, and aggressive modeling on retaliatory reactions.

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**Table 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Retaliation</th>
<th>Coworker displaced aggression</th>
<th>Seeking coworker social support</th>
<th>Reconciling</th>
<th>Reporting to an authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (0 = female)</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.10**</td>
<td>.28***</td>
<td>.18***</td>
<td>.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (0 = White)</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position (0 = non-management)</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure with the supervisor</td>
<td>−.00</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.18***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social desirability</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait anger</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stability</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>−.22***</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworker aggression</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>−.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Predictors**

- Supervisor aggression: .20*** .14** .07 .02 .08
- Locus of control: −.07 −.11** −.03 .25*** .21***
- Fear of retaliation: .05 −.03 .00 −.07 −.09
- Coworker aggressive modeling: .26*** .20*** .07 −.04 .07
- Problem solving modeling: .08 .08 .30*** .22*** .27***

**Moderators**

- Supervisor Aggression × Locus of Control: −.14*** −.11** .04 .11* .12*
- Supervisor Aggression × Fear of Retaliation: −.15*** −.22*** −.11 −.04 .01
- Supervisor Aggression × Coworker Aggressive Modeling: .16*** .10* .15** .07 .09
- Supervisor Aggression × Problem Solving Modeling: .13** −.07 −.04

R²  .41 .47 .26 .19 .22
Adjusted R²  .37 .44 .21 .13 .16
F  9.74*** 12.63*** 5.00*** 3.31*** 3.57***

*Note.* For retaliation, N = 238; for coworker displaced aggression, N = 240; for support seeking, N = 243; for reconciling, N = 239; for reporting to an authority, N = 219. Standardized beta coefficients are reported.

* p .05, one-tailed. ** p .01, one-tailed. *** p .001, one-tailed.
to supervisor aggression; there were also consistent moderating effects for fear of retaliation and aggressive modeling on coworker displaced aggression reactions. Inconsistencies occurred for the effects of the moderators on problem solving reactions to supervisor aggression. We believe these inconsistencies can be explained by considering the type of problem solving. Below, we provide a more detailed discussion. For each prediction, we discuss the similarities and differences across the studies.

Hypothesis 1 predicted LOC would moderate the effects of supervisor aggression on victims’ reactions such that lower LOC (external orientation) would influence retaliation and displaced aggression and higher LOC (internal orientation) would influence problem solving. We were able to test this prediction in all three studies for retaliation and displaced aggression but only in Studies 2 and 3 for problem solving. The findings were robust for the effects on the destructive reactions. All three studies show low LOC strengthened the relationship between supervisor aggression and retaliation, and the same effect was shown for coworker displaced aggression in Study 3. Consistent with our theorizing, this general pattern suggests externals respond to aggression destructively, whereas internals were more self-controlled.

The results also suggest internals were more likely to take action that could change the situation. In Study 3, we limited our analyses to victims who felt they had the opportunity to engage in problem solving behaviors. Study 3’s results show internals were more likely to engage in problem solving behavior but only when the behavior reflected a high level of independence and control (i.e., reconciling with and reporting the supervisor). LOC did not influence individuals to seek coworker social support—a behavior that involves seeking help and consolation from peers but does not focus on directly changing the situation or resolving the problem. The results from Study 1 are consistent with these findings, even though we did not assess problem solving explicitly. The cover story given to students was that the chair of the department would be using the instructor evaluations as a basis of assessing the department and the instructors’ effectiveness. Implied is that the evaluations would be used as a basis for change. Consistent with the stronger effects of supervisor aggression on problem solving reporting behavior found in Study 3, in Study 1 there was a positive relationship between instructor aggression and negative instructor evaluation. It appears students viewed the instructor evaluation as a mechanism for enacting change.10

In contrast to Study 1 and Study 3, there was not a significant interaction for supervisor aggression and LOC for problem solving in Study 2. For Study 2, we relied on a general measure of problem solving, which assessed the three types of problem solving behaviors captured in Study 3 in an overall measure. The results of Study 3 show LOC differentially impacted the problem solving behaviors and only for behaviors that emphasized internals’ control. Thus, it is possible that the lack of results for LOC in Study 2 highlights the need for LOC researchers to consider the type of behavior that allows victims to directly change the situation. Alternatively, the lack of effects of LOC on problem solving in Study 2 might stem from whether victims felt they were able to engage in the problem solving activities in their workplace. Nevertheless, the results suggest, overall, that internals are more likely to engage in behavior they believe can resolve threats they face.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted fear of retaliation would moderate the relationships between supervisor aggression and victims’ reactions. We were able to test the predictions in Study 1 for

10 We thank an anonymous reviewer for this idea.
retaliation and coworker displaced aggression and in Studies 2 and 3 on all of the victims’ reactions. Altogether, the pattern of the results support the learned inhibitions view (Bandura, 1973; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), which suggests higher fear of retaliation strengthens the effects of supervisor aggression on problem solving and lower fear of retaliation strengthens the effects on retaliation and displaced aggression. We found consistent effects for fear of retaliation on the destructive reactions and some inconsistencies with problem solving. Fear of retaliation weakened the positive effects of supervisor aggression on retaliation in all three studies and on coworker displaced aggression in Studies 2 and 3. Overall, this suggests employees consider their destructive behavior in context and discern when to (and not to) react destructively. In a situation where employees are fearful of retaliatory acts by an aggressive supervisor, they refrain from acting out aggressively. Though the effects for problem solving could only be tested in Studies 2 and 3, only in Study 2 (where problem solving was measured as an overall construct) did significant results emerge. Consistent with our theorizing, fear of retaliation heightened awareness about the threatening situation, making victims more likely to problem solve. As a whole, the results across the three studies suggest individuals consider the situational context and react according to their learned inhibitions.

Last, Hypothesis 4 predicted behavioral modeling would moderate the effects of supervisor aggression on victims’ reactions; coworker aggressive modeling was predicted to strengthen retaliation and displaced aggression reactions, and problem solving modeling was predicted to strengthen problem solving reactions. In Study 1, we were unable to test these predictions, and in Study 2, we tested only the effects of aggressive modeling. However, in Study 3, we examined both forms of behavioral modeling on victims’ reactions. The findings support the predictions for aggressive modeling. In both studies, aggressive modeling strengthened the positive effects of supervisor aggression on the destructive reactions—employees reacted to supervisor aggression more destructively (i.e., retaliating, displacing aggression) when coworkers modeled aggressive behavior. However, the effects of problem solving modeling were more complex. Problem solving modeling moderated and strengthened the effects of supervisor aggression only on problem solving behavior that was targeted at the source of modeling (i.e., coworkers). Problem solving modeling strengthened the relationship between supervisor aggression and seeking coworker support. In short, coworker aggressive modeling affects aggression targeted at both supervisors and coworkers, whereas coworker problem solving modeling seems to affect only coworker-targeted problem solving behaviors.
Implications for Theory and Future Research

The results of our studies have implications for theory and future research. First, a great deal of research has emerged to understand destructive reactions to supervisor aggression (e.g., Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper et al., 2008; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). Less empirical attention has been given to understanding constructive reactions (e.g., Tepper et al., 2001) and even less to why victims might react one way versus another. Our study addresses these issues. The findings across our three studies suggest LOC, fear of retaliation from the aggressive supervisor, and behavioral modeling of coworkers impact the degree to which victims engage in constructive or destructive reactions. Consequently, our research provides new insight for the workplace aggression and abusive supervision literatures and for theorizing about employees’ sense of control (i.e., LOC, fear of retaliation) and the impact of behavioral learning (i.e., behavioral modeling, fear of retaliation). We elaborate on these ideas below.

Our primary goal in this research was to understand the factors that influence how employees respond to supervisor aggression. The findings suggest LOC, fear of retaliation, and behavioral modeling are influential. Notably, the findings show supervisor aggression significantly and directly impacted retaliation, but only in Study 2 did it significantly relate to displaced aggression, and across all studies it did not significantly impact problem solving. This pattern suggests retaliation may be a primary reaction to supervisor aggression, and that, more or less, the other reactions depend upon individual and situational factors. That is, whether victims of supervisor aggression react destructively versus constructively depends on victims’ personality (e.g., LOC) and the situational context under which such abuse occurs (e.g., fearing retaliation from the aggressive supervisor, perceiving coworkers behave aggressively, perceiving coworkers problem solving). More research is needed to identify other factors that motivate victims’ responses. Additionally, more research is needed to understand the process by which employees choose to react one way versus the other. For example, it is entirely possible for employees to react destructively if they attribute the supervisor’s behavior to the supervisor, but victims might act constructively if they attribute the supervisor’s behavior to something they did. Again, more theorizing and research is needed to fully understand reactions to supervisor aggression.

The findings also have implications for theory and research on employees’ sense of control. LOC impacted destructive reactions to supervisor aggression; an external orientation motivates victims to react aggressively to supervisory threats. This finding is consistent with reactance theory (Wortman & Brehm, 1975), which suggests that threatening situations invoke destructive behavior and such behavior allows victims a way to express their hostilities about their helpless state. The results across the three studies suggest an external orientation heightens reactance for victims of supervisor aggression. Consistent with expectations, in Studies 2 and 3, internals demonstrated greater control and refrained from acting destructively. In Study 1 (the experiment), the relationship between supervisor aggression and retaliation was positive for internals. We argued this is because internals might have felt their reaction (evaluating the instructor poorly) would exact change in the aggressor’s behavior. Hence, an external orientation may enhance reactance behaviors that are destructive, but an internal orientation may also influence what is seemingly destructive behavior if victims believe doing so may reduce the aggression in the future. Research is needed to test these ideas.

The results show important differential effects of LOC on constructive reactions to supervisor aggression as well. By and large, prior research suggests LOC has an enduring and positive impact on different forms of employees’ behaviors that reflect high LOC individuals (internals) acting proactively (Ng et al., 2006, and Spector, 1982, for reviews). Our studies, however, show that internals are discerning in their behavioral choices, particularly in their reactions to supervisor aggression. Their proclivity to act constructively appears to be bounded. Internals seem to engage in behaviors that allow them to exert control tendencies but only when the behavior offers a direct way to resolve the problem (reconciling with or reporting the supervisor), as opposed to acts that may not allow for resolution (seeking coworker social support). Thus, some forms of problem solving more naturally appease control tendencies of internals. Future research might extend these ideas and examine the effects of LOC on behaviors that can more or less affect change.

Our findings also extend the aggression literature, specifically with regard to fear of retaliation and displaced aggression. We tested two theoretical views about the impact of fear of retaliation on displaced aggression reactions to supervisor aggression. Consistent findings across our field studies showed fear of retaliation weakened the positive effects of supervisor aggression on coworker displaced aggression. This pattern supports the learned inhibition view (Bandura, 1973; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) rather than the frustration–aggression view (Dollard et al., 1939). Although the frustration–aggression view has received empirical support within the social psychology literature (Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000), the learned inhibitions view emerged because the cathartic effect of displaced aggression was not consistently found (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). When aggressive behavior (e.g., coworker-directed aggression) would likely prove disruptive, the likelihood of catharsis decreases. Our results support this view; the context influenced individuals’ reactions to aggression. Displacing aggression on coworkers—individuals on whom victims have to rely—would likely destroy relationships and may further provoke the aggressive supervisor.

Additionally, our findings suggest fear of retaliation from a harmdoer is a powerful deterrent to different forms of aggressive reactions (i.e., retaliation, displaced aggression). Again, this contrasts with prior social psychology research on displaced aggression, which has shown aggression provokes displaced aggression when individuals fear retaliation from the source of aggression (Marcus-Newhall et al., 2000). Our work suggests researchers should consider the social context of organizations and how this context impacts behavior (Heath & Sitkin, 2001), specifically in terms of the sources and targets of aggressive reactions. That is, fear of retaliation may act to heighten one’s awareness of the social context. Acting out against one’s peers is not wise because these individuals may console the victim and/or may respond with hostilities as a consequence of being the target of displaced aggression. The social context of our studies (individuals interdependent on others in school and at work) impacted the nature of the aggression × fear of retaliation reaction, wherein fear of retaliation acted as a form of behavioral control. Of course, we are not proposing that supervisors and organizational decision makers go
out and spark fear in their employees. Indeed, research in the behavioral ethics literature suggests these types of behavioral control tactics, while inhibiting aggressive reactions, may promote more clandestine deviant behaviors—acts conducted intentionally and surreptitiously (Treviño, Weaver, Gibson, & Toffler, 1999; Weaver, Treviño, & Cochran, 1999a, 1999b). Instead, we suggest that our tests differ from experimental research in social psychology (where individuals displace aggression on strangers) and highlight the importance of considering the social context of aggression. More research is needed to investigate more effective behavioral controls that deter supervisor aggression and victims’ destructive reactions and those that foster problem solving.

We expected that behavioral modeling would be one factor that facilitated destructive and constructive reactions to supervisor aggression. We argued that employees learn what is socially acceptable by watching what their peers do and then engage in similar behavior. Although the results support these arguments for aggressive reactions, the influence of problem solving modeling was more limited. Problem solving modeling only influenced seeking support from coworkers. It may be a consequence of measurement (i.e., more items about seeking support), but it might also be decision biases at play. Decision research has shown individuals have a tendency to focus on negative rather than positive information (see Rozin & Royzman, 2001, for a review). Research on leader behavior provides some suggestive evidence to support this idea. For instance, Detert et al. (2007) found that aggressive leader behavior (via perceptions of abusive supervision) provided more of a managerial mode of influence on employees’ behavior than did ethical leader behavior (via perceptions of ethical leadership). Thus, it may be that aggressive modeling holds more influence to affect behavioral learning than does problem solving modeling because aggressive acts (being harmful and negative) are more salient to employees. More research is needed to fully understand the impact of modeling on constructive work behavior.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest supervisor aggression influences both aggressive and constructive responses from employees. The costs of supervisor aggression are considerable (Tepper et al., 2006). In general, supervisor aggression research suggests organizational decision makers should take notice and monitor train supervisors’ effective interactions with their subordinates. Still, we understand this may not fully address the issue. Employees decide whether a supervisor is acting aggressively, regardless of whether or not the supervisor is actually intending to harm the subordinate. This reality suggests organizations must also focus on employees and try to promote constructive rather than destructive behavior. A first step in this direction is ensuring that employees feel they have the access to problem solving approaches.

Organizations should strive to inform employees about constructive problem solving behaviors and present avenues for assisting employees with interpersonal conflicts at work (e.g., open door policies that may enhance reconciling behavior, safe reporting mechanisms). The results suggest a range of such options may be most helpful. For example, internals like to take charge and actively pursue change, particularly with regard to threats in the work environment. The results show that internals were more likely to engage in problem solving behaviors that allowed them to try to resolve the problem directly when these options are available to them.

Additionally, the results of our study suggest behavioral controls may assist organizations in inhibiting destructive and enhancing constructive reactions to supervisor aggression. For example, higher fear of retaliation lessened victims’ destructive reactions. We, again, do not suggest decision makers exact fear in this way. Prior research demonstrates positive approaches for controlling behavior are a more effective means of promoting constructive behavior than fostering fear and punishing employees (Treviño et al., 1999; Weaver et al., 1999a, 1999b). Organizations would benefit from policies and programs that promote positive values (e.g., ethics, problem solving) and make these values apparent to employees (Treviño et al., 1999; Weaver et al., 1999a, 1999b). Thus, creating organizational structures that protect employees from aggressive behavior (i.e., punishments against those who engage in workplace aggression, monitoring systems that ensure individuals are treating each other respectfully) can safeguard employees from supervisor aggression and may lessen the likelihood of employees engaging in destructive behavior themselves. Establishing a work environment that emphasizes respectful behavior and protection of all employees can assist organizations in harnessing constructive rather than destructive interpersonal behaviors.

Limitations

Like all studies, ours is not without limitations. One limitation is that our research did not examine all potential reactions to perceived aggression. For example, other types of displaced aggression could be investigated in the future (e.g., aggression against strangers, friends, and/or family members). Indeed, it would be interesting to explore whether different situational and individual factors make non-work targets of displaced aggression more likely. Additionally, our study examined three moderator variables, and surely there are others that influence employees’ responses. We hope future researchers explore these ideas further.

Further, Study 2 and 3 used self-reported data, which may influence method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We took several steps to reduce such concerns. In Study 2, data were collected anonymously from respondents to reduce inhibitions about responding to sensitive questions (e.g., supervisor aggression, aggressive modeling, retaliation, displaced aggression). In Study 3, participants were recruited via students. Past research has shown that individuals underreport norm-violating behaviors if data are collected with the assistance of organizational decision makers—neither design used this method. Research has shown that, with the precautions we took, respondents are fairly candid in their responses (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Indeed, research has demonstrated self-reported data are most appropriate when evaluating victims’ perceptions of and reactions to aggression (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Dalal, 2005; Tepper, 2007), and that such data are more accurate than other-source reports (Dalal, 2005; Sackett, Berry, Wiemann, & Laczo, 2006). These efforts, in conjunction with the experimental design in Study 1, provide greater confidence in the results.
Conclusion

Workplace aggression researchers have spent considerable effort investigating the nature and costs of aggression (see Neuman & Baron, 1998, for a review). An unfortunate reality for organizational decision makers is that supervisor aggression is on the rise, and such acts are detrimental. Although research has shown that some victims respond destructively to supervisor aggression, research has also shown that some victims react constructively (Bies & Tripp, 1996, 1998). Our research investigates the factors that influence victims’ responses and demonstrates that both individual and situational factors influence employee responses to supervisor aggression. The results of our studies suggest organizations can lessen destructive reactions and enhance constructive reactions through the selection of their employees (having employees with a strong LOC) and by enhancing constructive ways for employees to respond to supervisor aggression, integrating behavioral controls that hold employees accountable for and punishing destructive behavior, and fostering effective (rather than aggressive) behavior among organizational members.

References


Dalal, R. S. (2005). A meta-analysis of the relationship between organizational decision makers is that supervisor aggression is on the rise, and such acts are detrimental. Although research has shown that some victims respond destructively to supervisor aggression, research has also shown that some victims react constructively (Bies & Tripp, 1996, 1998). Our research investigates the factors that influence victims’ responses and demonstrates that both individual and situational factors influence employee responses to supervisor aggression. The results of our studies suggest organizations can lessen destructive reactions and enhance constructive reactions through the selection of their employees (having employees with a strong LOC) and by enhancing constructive ways for employees to respond to supervisor aggression, integrating behavioral controls that hold employees accountable for and punishing destructive behavior, and fostering effective (rather than aggressive) behavior among organizational members.


### Appendix

#### Summary of the Findings Across the Three Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prediction</th>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Study 2</th>
<th>Study 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Moderating effects of LOC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) on problem solving</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>Mixed support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) on retaliation</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) on displaced aggression</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Moderating effects of fear of retaliation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) on problem solving</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) on retaliation</td>
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<td>Supported</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Moderating effects of fear of retaliation on displaced aggression</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Frustration-aggression view</td>
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<td>Supported</td>
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<td>H4: Moderating effects of behavioral modeling</td>
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<td>(a) Aggressive modeling on retaliation</td>
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<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Aggressive modeling on displaced aggression</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Problem solving modeling on problem solving</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>Mixed support</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note. H1 = Hypothesis 1; H2 = Hypothesis 2; H3 = Hypothesis 3; H4 = Hypothesis 4; LOC = locus of control; ns = not significant; a dash indicates that the prediction was not tested or, for H3 (opposing predictions about the moderating effects of fear of retaliation on coworker displaced aggression reactions to supervisor aggression), that the opposing view was not supported.*