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This research examines 3rd parties’ reactions to the abusive supervision of a coworker. Reactions were theorized to depend on 3rd parties’ beliefs about the targeted coworker and, specifically, whether the target of abuse was considered deserving of mistreatment. We predicted that 3rd parties would experience anger when targets of abuse were considered undeserving of mistreatment; angered 3rd parties would then be motivated to exclude the targeted coworker. Conversely, we predicted that 3rd parties would experience contentment when targets of abuse were considered deserving of mistreatment; contented 3rd parties would then be motivated to exclude the targeted coworker. Additionally, we predicted that 3rd parties’ moral identity would moderate the effects of 3rd parties’ experienced emotions on their behavioral reactions, such that a strong moral identity would strengthen ethical behavior (i.e., coworker support) and weaken harmful behavior (i.e., supervisor-directed deviance, coworker exclusion). Moderated mediation results supported the predictions. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: abusive supervision, exclusion beliefs, supervisor-directed deviance, coworker support, coworker exclusion

Many of us have been exposed to organizational authorities acting cruelly or abusively toward employees. Both the popular press (Pachter, 2003; Sutton, 2010) and academic studies (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Neuman & Keashly, 2003) have shown that employees are often victim to egregious and demeaning acts by supervisors, termed abusive supervision (subordinates’ perceptions of sustained hostility against them by a supervisor; Tepper, 2000). Given its prevalence, researchers have sought to understand the consequences of abusive supervision and found it has a significant toll on its victims. For instance, abusive supervision has been found to heighten victims’ psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, self-regulation impairment, and job burnout (see Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013, and Tepper, 2007, for reviews). Recently, researchers (e.g., Harris, Harvey, Harris, & Cast, 2013; Priesemuth, 2013) have turned their attention to understanding how abusive supervision affects the larger work environment and, specifically, to third party employees. This research has shown that witnessing abuse can motivate different third party behavioral reactions, such as counterproductive behavior that is harmful to coworkers (Harris, Harvey, Harris, & Cast, 2013) and prosocial behavior intended to help the target of abuse (Priesemuth, 2013). What is less clear, though, is why third parties react one way versus another and which factors influence their different reactions.

Traditional applications of deontic justice theory (Folger, 1998, 2001) suggest that witnessing abusive supervision would anger third parties. The experience of anger would then motivate these third parties to redress the transgression by harming the perpetrator, particularly if these third parties held a weak moral identity (defined as the degree to which moral principles are strongly aligned with one’s sense of self; Aquino & Reed, 2002) because third parties with a weak moral identity are less concerned about maintaining kind, caring, and friendly behavior toward others (see Jennings, Mitchell, & Hannah, in press, for a review). An implicit assumption to the traditional application of deontic justice theory, however, is that all third parties become angered by another’s mistreatment because all third parties believe mistreating others is unfair.

We present an alternative view and theorize that not all third parties believe it is unfair to mistreat specific coworkers. Our arguments are consistent with research that has shown that employees sometimes find coworkers to be provocative targets of abuse (Kim & Glomb, 2010; Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, & Huang, 2011). Moreover, recent work has shown that third parties’ perceptions of fairness can be biased (Blader, Wiesenfeld, Fortin, & Wheeler-Smith, 2013). This research has shown that third parties’ reactions depend on their evaluation of the recipient of the
treatment. Third parties become angered by unfair outcomes given to recipients who they positively evaluate and become contented by unfair outcomes given to recipients who they negatively evaluate. Given these findings, we argue that it is possible for some third parties not to experience anger as is implicit in traditional deontic justice reasoning but instead may experience contentment from the abuse. We theorize that the different emotions elicited will motivate different behavioral reactions from third parties.

Our work, therefore, extends deontic principles to consider third parties' evaluation of the target of abuse. We develop and test a model, which integrates principles from deontic justice theory (Folger, 2001, 2012) with scope of justice theory (Deutsch, 1974; Opotow, 1990, 1995), to explain differential third party reactions to the abusive supervision of a coworker. Deontic justice theory suggests that mistreating another (i.e., abusive supervision) motivates third parties' to react according to what they believe is "just" and fair. We draw from scope of justice theory to explain that third parties' beliefs about what is "just" depend on their perceptions of the target of abuse. Specifically, we propose a critical factor that influences third party reactions is their exclusion beliefs, defined as individuals' beliefs about the degree to which another person deserves disrespectful or unfair treatment (Opotow, 2012).

We theorize that witnessing abusive supervision elicits different emotions and that the type of emotion evoked depends on third parties' exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse. Third parties with lower exclusion beliefs perceive the target as undeserving of mistreatment, and, thus, these third parties should experience anger—a sense of hostility about the victim’s abuse. Third parties with higher exclusion beliefs perceive the target as deserving of mistreatment, and, thus, these third parties should experience contentment—a sense of satisfaction with the victim’s abuse. Because each emotion motivates unique behavioral responses, we predict third parties who experience anger will be motivated to harm the supervisor (i.e., supervisor-directed deviance) and offer support to the target of abuse (i.e., coworker support). Third parties who experience contentment will be motivated to exclude the target (i.e., coworker exclusion). Consistent with third party research (see Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004) and moral self theory (Blasi, 1984, 2004), we also predict that the effects of the experienced emotions prompted from the abuse on third parties' behavioral reactions will be moderated by third parties' moral identity.

Our work makes three primary contributions. First, our research extends the literature by explaining why abusive supervision motivates different third party reactions. Much of the work on abusive supervision has examined its effects from the victim’s or supervisor’s perspective (see Martinko et al., 2013 and Tepper, 2007, for reviews). Although emerging work has demonstrated abuse can be detrimental to third parties (e.g., Harris et al., 2013; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007), we suggest that not all third parties react to abuse in the same way because not all third parties hold the same beliefs about the person being abused. Second, we extend the literature on third party reactions to mistreatment. Mitchell, Vogel, and Folger (2012) called on researchers to extend deontic reasoning to consider a broader range of third party reactions. Our work addresses this call. We provide an important clarification to deontic justice reasoning, namely, that third party reactions depend on third parties' beliefs about the target of the treatment. Therefore, we refine deontic justice theory to consider important boundary conditions that impact third party reactions to others' mistreatment. Third, our work contributes to the workplace deviance literature in explaining how abusive supervision can promote a spiral of destructive work behavior (e.g., supervisor-directed deviance, coworker exclusion). Research has shown that these types of behaviors are costly to organizations (Detert, Treviño, Burris, & Andiappan, 2007; Dunlop & Lee, 2004). Thus, it is important to understand how abusive supervision incites third parties' harmful behavior in order for decision makers to mitigate it.

Theoretical Overview

The Greek word *deon* means duty or obligation. Folger (2001) thus proposed a deontic justice theory, which suggests that witnessing another’s mistreatment engenders third parties’ sense of...
obligation to abide by what they believe is fair and right. The theory specifies that witnessing mistreatment creates a deontic motivation in which third parties experience other-focused emotions—emotions related to the person being abused—and that the elicited emotion from the mistreatment creates action tendencies that align with what the third parties believe is just.

Folger (2001) proposed that the primary emotion third parties experience from witnessing another’s mistreatment is anger. Anger is experienced as a moral emotion (Hoffman, 1989, 2000; Montada & Schneider, 1989); it is an emotion elicited by considering the interests and welfare of another person (Haidt, 2003). Anger derives from third parties’ sense that the witnessed treatment violated moral principles associated with individual rights and liberty (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Thus, anger reflects third parties’ outrage about what is considered an unjustifiable event. It is in this way that anger forms as an honorable impulse; it is an automatic and convincing gut feeling about the other person’s treatment (Haidt, 2003).

Although some third parties may experience anger, we theorize that not all will because not all third parties may believe it is unfair to mistreat certain individuals. In regard to this point, Blader, Wiesenfeld, Rothman, and Wheeler-Smith (2010) argued that third parties’ justice judgments are biased by their evaluation of the observed target. They proposed that the degree to which objectively fair or unfair outcomes would be judged as fair or unfair depends on whether these third parties hold positive or negative attitudes about the recipient of the outcome. When third parties hold a positive evaluation of the recipient, their reactions should be congruent with their social affiliation with the recipient. Conversely, when third parties hold a negative evaluation of the recipient, their reactions should be consistent with their aversion to the recipient. In support of these ideas, Blader et al. (2013) found that third parties who held a negative evaluation of the recipient of an objectively unfair outcome judged the outcome as more fair and were content with the outcome. By comparison, those who held a positive evaluation of the recipient judged an objectively unfair outcome as less fair and were angered by the outcome.

We draw from Blader et al.’s (2010, 2013) ideas and contend that third parties may experience anger or contentment about abusive supervision, depending on their evaluations of the target of abuse. Indeed, scholars (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011) have recently suggested that some supervisors view certain subordinates as provocative targets for abuse; these targets are considered difficult, aggravating, and annoying, and so abusive supervision is merited. Further, some empirical work has shown that employees sometimes believe certain coworkers deserve mistreatment because these coworkers engage in behavior that makes them likely targets for abuse (Kim & Glomb, 2010; Lam et al., 2011). Thus, it is possible for some third parties to find certain coworkers as deserving of mistreatment.

Scope of justice theory (Deutsch, 1974; Opotow, 1990, 1995) explains why this might occur. The theory proposes that individuals’ exclusion beliefs—beliefs about whether another person deserves to be treated disrespectfully and unfairly (Opotow, 2012)—influence reactions to witnessed mistreatment. An evaluation of deservingness indicates a sense of “just deserts.” The person is viewed as holding certain characteristics or has acted in a manner that suggests he or she has earned mistreatment. Consequently, when individuals are considered deserving of mistreatment, the general opposition to acts that violate human rights becomes suspended. Excluded individuals are considered nomenclatures, expendable, and undeserving of respect. Thus, individuals who hold strong exclusion beliefs for another believe it is morally permissible to harm the person. In contrast, low exclusion beliefs suggest that the person should be treated in a manner similar to how the third party should be treated: with respect and dignity. Included individuals are regarded as approximate equals and, therefore, are believed to be undeserving of mistreatment. Altogether, scope of justice theory proposes that third parties have more supportive reactions for targets of abuse when third parties hold weak exclusion beliefs about the target, and third parties have less supportive reactions for targets of abuse when third parties hold strong exclusion beliefs about the target.

**Third Parties’ Exclusion Beliefs and Emotions Evoked From Abusive Supervision**

Other-focused emotions of anger and contentment depend on the relative cognitive appraisal associated with each emotion (Blader et al., 2010, 2013). These emotions are contingent on third parties’ evaluation “of the person about whom that emotion is felt” (Blader et al., 2010, p. 35). Blader et al. (2013) argued that observers’ evaluation of the recipient serves as a necessary “starting point or anchor of their own assessment and reaction to the target’s encounter” (p. 64). Based on scope of justice theory (Opotow, 1990, 1995), we suggest that how observers respond to another’s mistreatment depends on their exclusion beliefs. The theory proposes that exclusion beliefs influence emotional reactions to witnessed mistreatment and that both anger and contentment are modulated by third parties’ evaluation of the deservedness of the person who is being mistreated (Deutsch, 1990; Feather, 2006). Therefore, we posit that a critical determinant to whether anger or contentment would be experienced is third parties’ beliefs regarding whether the target of abuse is considered deserving of the mistreatment (i.e., exclusion beliefs).

Along these lines, Feather (2006) suggested that emotions elicited by witnessing another person’s mistreatment are based on primitive constructions—good things should happen to good people, and bad things should happen to bad people. Consistent with Feather’s arguments, moral emotions scholars (Hoffman, 2000; Montada & Schneider, 1989) have argued that anger may occur in an automatic and rapid fashion when third parties believe the person is undeserving of mistreatment. Mullen and Skitka (2006) argued that third parties experience anger from certain events because the witnessed events are inconsistent with their point of view. In our study, we suggest that anger is possible for third parties who believe the target is undeserving of mistreatment. To be sure, experimental evidence has shown that when third parties view a victim as less deserving of mistreatment, they become angry (see Hafer & Bégue, 2005, for a review).

Feather (2006) also argued that if the person is viewed as deserving of mistreatment, a sense of satisfaction may be possible, such as schadenfreude (taking pleasure from another’s misfortune). This sense of satisfaction is experienced because these third parties desire to denigrate or cut down the local person (Feather, 2008). The person is viewed as inferior to the observer in some way (Jankowski & Takahashi, 2014; Takahashi et al., 2009). As such, experienced contentment is egocentric (Montada & Schneider, 1989), representing an
unfortunate reflection of malevolence in human nature (Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003). We theorize that high exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse will enhance feelings of contentment when these targets are abused by supervisors. Empirical findings have supported these arguments and have shown that third parties experience contentment when they believe a target is deserving of mistreatment (Feather, 2008).

Thus, we theorize that the emotion third parties experience from witnessing abusive supervision will align with their exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse. Lower exclusion beliefs suggest that the person being abused should be treated like the third party—in a dignified and respectful manner. Consequently, witnessing the abuse of a coworker who is not excluded would not sit well with these third parties and would elicit anger. In contrast, higher exclusion beliefs suggest that the third party believes it is appropriate to harm the target. Excluded targets are presumed to have earned any mistreatment that befalls them. Consequently, third parties who hold high exclusion beliefs for targets should experience contentment from the abuse because they would be satisfied that these targeted coworkers are getting their “just deserts.”

Hypothesis 1: Third parties’ exclusion beliefs about the targeted coworker will moderate the relationship between abusive supervision of the coworker and third parties’ emotions, such that abusive supervision of the coworker will more strongly and positively impact third parties’ (a) anger when exclusion beliefs are lower rather than higher and (b) contentment when exclusion beliefs are higher rather than lower.

Third Parties’ Emotions and Behavioral Reactions to Abusive Supervision of Coworkers

We further suggest that the motivational effects of exclusion beliefs from witnessed abusive supervision will create specific action tendencies that are consistent with third parties’ beliefs about the target of abuse. Emotions create a state of readiness that guides behavior (Frijda, 1988). Folger (2001) argued that emotions elicited from witnessing another’s mistreatment are based on what third parties believe is appropriate; these emotions, then, motivate third parties to engage in behavior that is consistent with what they feel is right. We suggest that third parties who become angry by abusive supervision of a coworker (or those who hold low exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse) will become motivated to restore fairness for the target of abuse and treat the target with dignity. Third parties who experience contentment by the abuse (or those who hold high exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse) will be motivated to perpetuate mistreatment against the target of abuse.

Indeed, theory suggests emotions provoke affect-driven behaviors (e.g., Frijda, 1988; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Affect-driven behaviors operate “behavior around the demands of the precipitating situation” (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996, p. 54). The emotions instigated from the situation generate involuntary and automatic intentions and motivations. Both anger and contentment have specific action tendencies (Haidt, 2003), which we suggest align with third parties’ exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse.

Anger instigated from witnessing harm against another motivates two different action tendencies. The first action tendency angered third parties experience is to “attack, humiliate, or otherwise get back at the person who is perceived to be acting unfairly or immorally” (Haidt, 2003, p. 856). Anger energizes third parties to fight for and protect the individual who has been victimized (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O’Connor, 1987). The greater the anger experienced, the stronger the restorative impulses (Darley & Pittman, 2003). For instance, experienced anger from perceived injustices has been found to motivate third parties to harm transgressors (O’Gorman, Wilson, & Miller, 2005), even when doing so incurs personal costs (e.g., Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010; Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002). The second action tendency that angered third parties experience is to help and support victims (van Zomeren & Lodwijkx, 2005). For example, research has shown that anger influences third parties to engage in prosocial behavior, such as demonstrating support and care for the victim (Earnshaw, Pitpitan, & Chaudoir, 2011; van Zomeren & Lodwijkx, 2005; van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). Altogether these arguments suggest that third parties who experience anger from abusive supervision of a coworker (i.e., those who hold weak exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse) may direct harmful behaviors toward the supervisor (i.e., supervisor-directed deviance) and may direct supportive behaviors toward the target of abuse (i.e., coworker support).

In contrast, contentment experienced from another person’s mistreatment does not promote beneficial actions toward mistreated individuals. In fact, Haidt (2003) argued that positive emotions evoked from another’s misfortune seem to have no prosocial tendencies whatsoever. Instead, these emotions motivate behaviors that translate into direct derogation and exclusion of the source of contentment (Opotow & Weiss, 2000; Spears & Leach, 2004). For example, experienced contentment from another’s misfortune motivates individuals to distance themselves from and socially exclude the target (Feather, 2008; Sundie, Ward, Beal, Chin, & Geiger-Oneto, 2009). Because third parties who experience contentment believe these abused individuals are deserving of the mistreatment, they would likely be motivated to perpetuate harm against the target of abuse by excluding them (i.e., coworker exclusion).

The Influence of Moral Identity on Third Parties’ Behavioral Reactions

Scholars who integrate deontic justice reasoning into models examining third party behavioral reactions often consider the influence of moral identity (see Jennings et al., in press). This is because a strong moral identity has been theorized and demonstrated to be a trait that effectively regulates individuals’ moral behavior (cf. Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011; Aquino, Reed, Stewart, & Shapiro, 2005). Moral identity is defined as the extent to which moral characteristics, such as being caring, kind, and friendly, are internalized into an individual’s self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral self theory (Blasi, 1983; Erikson, 1964) articulates that a strong moral identity generates a motivation that “serves to reinforce individuals’ ethical stance and enables them to react to different situations more effectively and ethically” (Jennings et al., in press, p. 49). A strong moral identity commands “a commitment to one’s sense of self to lines of action that promote and protect the welfare of others” (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998, p. 515). The motivational potency of moral identity inspires individuals to maintain behavioral self-consistency and preserve the integrity of their moral self-construal (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984). By contrast, individuals with a weak moral identity do not...
hold themselves to that moral benchmark and are, therefore, less likely to consider the ethicality or implications of their behavior toward others.

We theorize that the self-regulatory qualities of moral identity are particularly important to consider in the context of affect-driven behavior. Scholars have argued and found that affective reactions that occur as a result of observed transgressions (e.g., abusive supervision) happen rather quickly (Blasi, 2004; Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007). Emotions elicited by these situations are automatic and represent a reaction rather than deliberation about the situation (Monin et al., 2007). For this reason, Haidt (2001) argued that emotional reactions to such events create a “moral dumbfounding” effect, wherein the initial experience of emotion overwhelms cognition and, consequently, circumvents rational processes that might consider whether the person should be experiencing the emotion in the first place. Emotions elicited that contrast with the person’s sense of morality (i.e., his or her moral identity) are disconcerting. This tension motivates individuals to reduce affect-driven desires that are inconsistent with their sense of self and motivates them to strive to regulate their behavior with their sense of morality. That is, individuals who strongly define their sense of self with the characteristics of being caring, kind, and friendly (i.e., individuals with a strong moral identity) strive to ensure that their actions are consistent with those core characteristics (Jordan, Mullen, & Murphighan, 2011).

Thus, although emotion exerts a strong motivational force, it alone does not paint the entire picture of moral motivation (Blasi, 2004; Hardy & Carlo, 2005). In fact, researchers have found that emotion only moderately accounts for (un)ethical behavior (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). This implies that individuals are not blindly guided only by their emotions. Moral self theory (Blasi, 1984, 2004) suggests that moral identity exerts a strong influence in diffusing the tension associated with emotions that motivate unethical behavior and one’s moral sense of self. A strong moral identity encourages the regulation of behavior to meet moral standards. It is in this way that a strong moral identity assists moral motivation and helps third parties do the right thing, regardless of the emotions they may experience. Hence, third parties who hold a strong moral identity should be able to control their desires to act on their affect-driven tendencies and resist emotionally charged desires to behave inappropriately; instead, a strong moral identity should prompt individuals to engage in behavior aligned with the principles of care and kindness.

Hypothesis 2: Moral identity will moderate the effects of emotions on behaviors such that (a) the positive relationship between anger and supervisor-directed deviance will be stronger when moral identity is lower rather than higher, (b) the positive relationship between anger and coworker support will be stronger when moral identity is higher rather than lower, and (c) the positive relationship between contentment and coworker exclusion will be stronger when moral identity is lower rather than higher.

These arguments suggest that moral identity influences third parties’ motivation to act on their emotional reactions from witnessing coworkers be abused by a supervisor. Accordingly, moral identity should assist third parties in maintaining ethical reactions to witnessed abusive supervision. In particular, we theorize that third parties who hold lower exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse will likely become angry from witnessing the abusive supervision; this anger will heighten desires to harm the transgressor (i.e., supervisor-directed deviance) and help the victim (i.e., coworker support). Third parties who hold higher exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse should experience contentment, which should motivate perpetuating mistreatment against the target of abuse through coworker exclusion. Although offering support to the target of abuse aligns with moral principles of care and kindness, the desire to harm the supervisor and exclude the coworker are inconsistent with a strong moral identity. Therefore, third parties with a strong moral identity should become particularly motivated to resist the temptation to act badly and instead take the high road and behave more ethically.

In sum, we predict that the influence of abusive supervision of a coworker should indirectly impact third parties’ behavioral reactions via their emotions elicited by witnessing abusive supervision but that their reactions will depend on third parties’ exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse and their moral identity. When anger is elicited by abusive supervision (i.e., third parties’ exclusion beliefs are low), third parties with a strong moral identity will be less likely to act on their desire to punish the supervisor (i.e., supervisor-directed deviance) and more likely to act on their desire to help the target of abuse (i.e., coworker support) because doing so would be consistent with the moral principles of being a kind, caring, and friendly person. When contentment is elicited (i.e., third parties’ exclusion beliefs are high), third parties with a strong moral identity will be less likely to act on their desires to exclude the target of abuse because exercising restraint in that fashion would also be consistent with the moral principles of being a kind, caring, and friendly person.

Hypothesis 3(a): The indirect effect of abusive supervision of the coworker via anger on supervisor-directed deviance will be more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs are lower (rather than higher) and moral identity is lower (rather than higher).

Hypothesis 3(b): The indirect effect of abusive supervision of the coworker via anger on coworker support will be more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs are lower (rather than higher) and moral identity is higher (rather than lower).

Hypothesis 3(c): The indirect effect of abusive supervision of the coworker via contentment on coworker exclusion will be more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs are higher (rather than lower) and moral identity is lower (rather than higher).

Method

Sample and Procedure

Data were collected from full-time employees of various organizations located in the United States in multiple industries, including finance, insurance, education, healthcare, information technology, and retail. Surveys were administered via the Internet and across two time periods. Undergraduate business administration students were asked to serve as organizational contacts for course credit. Students were asked to recruit up to two adults who worked full-time in different organizations and who worked in an environment with other coworkers. The researchers contacted the
participants directly. This convenience sampling data collection technique has been used successfully by a variety of researchers (e.g., Grant & Mayer, 2009; Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012).

We received the contact information for 416 potential study participants, of whom 358 participated in the Time 1 survey (86.1% response rate) and 322 participated in the Time 2 survey (77.4% response rate). Given the importance of careful responding (D. Berry et al., 1992; Clark, Gironda, & Young, 2003), we followed procedures to identify and remove careless responders (e.g., Meade & Craig, 2012). In particular, we embedded instructed response items within each of the surveys (a sample item is “Please mark the No. 3”), assessed consistency indices, and assessed the length of time it took participants to complete the survey. Participants who incorrectly responded to the instructed response items, who responded with the same answer across the surveys (such as marking all No. 3s), or who completed the survey within a very brief time frame were not included in the analyses.

In addition, we integrated a critical incident technique in our survey design. Researchers have argued that general survey studies make it difficult, if not impossible, to effectively examine the nature of specific events related to mistreatment and respondents’ reactions to those events (see Hershcovis, 2011). Scholars, therefore, recommend the use of a critical incident technique to focus the study on actions of specific perpetrators and respondents’ idiosyncratic reactions (Flanagan, 1954; Hershcovis, 2011) with the focus on a specific event (Korsgaard, Brodt, & Whitener, 2002). This technique has been demonstrated to be valid and effective in assessing individuals’ perceptions of and reactions to mistreatment by and conflict with supervisors (e.g., Bobocel, 2013; Korsgaard et al., 2002; Wang et al., 2013). Although research has shown that recalling events may dilute the effects associated with self-reported emotions (Thomas & Diener, 1990), research has also demonstrated that asking participants to recall contextual details (e.g., details associated with witnessed abusive supervision of a coworker) aids in the accuracy and vividness of retrospection (Lang, Kozak, Miller, Levin, & McLean, 1980; Robinson & Clore, 2001). Accordingly, at the beginning of the Time 1 survey and prior to completing the survey’s measures, participants were asked to recall details regarding a time when a coworker had been treated in an unfavorable, unfriendly, or contentious manner by a supervisor. We asked participants to describe this situation for a frame of reference; respondents also provided us with the initials of the coworker and supervisor in that situation. The coworker and supervisor initials were automatically populated into the Time 1 and Time 2 survey items that focused on either the coworker or supervisor. As an example, when rating perceptions of abusive supervision against the identified coworker, we asked respondents to refer to the situation and individuals identified in the situation they provided (and the initials of the identified coworker and supervisor were inserted as a reference in the measure instructions). In addition, the critical incident described by the respondent at the beginning of the Time 1 survey was provided to participants at the beginning of the Time 2 survey for reference. Given the purpose of our study, we evaluated the critical incidents to verify that participants witnessed abuse. Seven participants who indicated they had not directly witnessed abusive supervision of a coworker were removed from the data and not included in the analyses.

At Time 1, participants completed measures of abusive supervision of the coworker, exclusion beliefs about the coworker, experienced emotions, moral identity, control variables, and demographics. At Time 2, participants rated their behaviors (supervisor-directed defiance, coworker support, and coworker exclusion). Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2012) suggested that researchers use time separation between predictor and criterion variables to reduce consistency motifs and demand characteristics associated in common method variance (CMV) bias. Accordingly, the surveys were separated in time by 1 month, as research has demonstrated a 1-month time lag significantly reduces CMV-related inflation (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Clark, 2002). Further, a time lag of 1 month is consistent with published work examining the influence of perceptions on behavior (e.g., Jensen, Patel, & Raver, 2014; Matthews, Wayne, & Ford, 2014; Rodell, 2013).

Complete data for all variables in our theoretical model were available from 221 matched Time 1–Time 2 observations from eligible participants. Analysis of variance tests demonstrated that no significant differences existed between demographics of the individuals who responded at Time 2 and nonresponders from Time 1. On average, participants were 41.5 years old (SD = 13.0 years) and had worked for their organization for 8.3 years (SD = 9.0 years); 57% were female, 81.4% were White, and 54.8% worked in nonsupervisory positions.

**Measures**

**Abusive supervision of the targeted coworker.** We measured abusive supervision of the coworker using Tepper’s (2000) 15-item abusive supervision measure. Third parties were asked to rate how often they witnessed or were aware of the supervisor (identified in the situation) engaging in each of the listed behaviors against the coworker identified in the situation (e.g., “Ridiculed the coworker.” “Put down the coworker in front of others”). On a 5-point scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always).

**Exclusion beliefs about the targeted coworker.** We followed measure development procedures (Hinkin, 1998) to create a measure of exclusion beliefs. First, items were developed based on Otopow’s (1990, 1995) work and definition of exclusion beliefs (i.e., “It is OK to treat this coworker unfairly,” and “This coworker

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1 EFA was conducted to explore the factor structure of three items created for the exclusion beliefs measure from an Amazon Mechanical Turk sample (N = 126; average age = 29.7 years [SD = 7.84] and organizational tenure = 4.1 years [SD = 3.41]; 51.6% were female, 84.9% were White, and 69.8% were in nonsupervisory positions). We dropped one item, which loaded separately and had an unacceptably low loading (.03). The remaining two items yielded one factor (λ > 1.0), accounting for 54.6% of the variance. Each item loading exceeded .80. The measure’s alpha was .77. Data to examine the discriminant validity of the measure were collected via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (N = 250; average age = 29.4 years [SD = 8.72] and organizational tenure = 3.58 years [SD = 3.74]; 68% were female, 82% were White, and 77.2% were in nonsupervisory positions). We examined the distinctiveness of our measure to measures of trust in the relationship between supervisor and coworker (Mayer & Gavin, 2006; α = .81), similarity to the coworker (Liden et al., 1993; α = .94), and dislike for the coworker (Wayne & Ferris, 1990; α = .91). The correlations provide preliminary evidence of discriminant validity: exclusion beliefs with trust in the coworker r = −.19, p < .01; with similarity to the coworker r = −.24, p < .01; with dislike for the coworker r = .59, p < .01. CFA results also suggest the measures are distinct: the four-factor measurement model fit the data reasonably well—χ²(100) = 372.46, p < .001; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .10; SRMR = .07—and was a better fit than all nested alternatives.
deserves to be treated poorly”). Second, data from a separate sample of working adults were used to conduct an exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which revealed two items loaded on one factor. Third, data from a separate sample of working adults provided preliminary evidence of discriminant validity of the measure. Given this evidence, we assessed exclusion beliefs with our developed measure and asked third parties to rate the two items on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

**Emotions.** Anger and contentment were assessed with three-item measures by Frederickson, Tugade, Waugh, and Larkin (2003). Third parties rated the extent to which they felt each emotion (for anger: angry, irritated, and annoyed; for contentment: content, serene, and peaceful) as a consequence of the supervisor’s treatment of the coworker identified in the situation on a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all, 5 = Extremely).

**Moral identity.** Moral identity was assessed with Aquino and Reed’s (2002) five-item measure. Third parties read a series of moral characteristics that could describe a person (e.g., caring, kind, friendly) and were asked to rate their agreement with a series of items about their internalization of these characteristics (e.g., “Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am,” “It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics”) on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

**Supervisor-directed deviance.** Supervisor-directed deviance was assessed with Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) 10-item measure. Third parties indicated how often they engaged in the listed behaviors toward the supervisor identified in the situation (e.g., “Acted rudely toward the supervisor,” “Gossiped about the supervisor”) on a 5-point scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always).

**Coworker support.** Coworker support was assessed with Westring and Ryan’s (2010) nine-item measure. Third parties rated their agreement about whether they engaged in the listed behaviors toward the coworker in the situation (e.g., “Provided the coworker emotional support,” “Provided the coworker with help to handle the situation with the supervisor”) on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

**Coworker exclusion.** Coworker exclusion was assessed with Hitlan and Noel’s (2009) seven-item measure. Third parties indicated their agreement about whether they engaged in the listed behaviors toward the coworker in the situation (e.g., “Gave the coworker the ‘silent treatment,’” “ Shut out the coworker from your conversations”) on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

**Control variables.** Because research on abusive supervision suggests that third parties are more likely to agree with abusive supervisors to whom they are similar (Tepper et al., 2011), we controlled for third parties’ perceived similarity to the supervisor with Liden, Wayne, and Stilwell’s (1993) six-item measure (e.g., “This supervisor and I are similar in terms of our outlook, perspective, and values.” “I think that this supervisor and I will see things in the same way”). We also controlled for the third parties’ gender, the target of abuse’s gender, and the third parties’ work tenure with the target of abuse, as research has shown that gender (Malamut & Offermann, 2001; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007) and the length of time third parties know the victim (Eaton, 2013; Priesemuth, 2013) may influence third parties’ reactions.

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**Results**

**Measurement Model Results**

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the distinctiveness of the variables in our hypothesized model. Item parcels for several of the latent constructs (i.e., abusive supervision of the coworker, perceived similarity to the supervisor, supervisor-directed deviance, coworker support, coworker exclusion) were used, given the number of items compared with the study’s sample size (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). For each of these constructs, we created three parcels by successively assigning highest and lowest loading items across parcels (e.g., Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006). Further, because there were two items measuring exclusion beliefs, these items were averaged and specified to load onto their latent construct at the square root of alpha, and its error variance was fixed to $(1 - \alpha)(\text{variance})$, following recommendations by Kline (2005). Results indicated the hypothesized measurement model was a good fit to the data: $-\chi^2(289) = 457.82, p < .001$; comparative fit index (CFI) = .96; root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05; standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .05—and was a better fit compared with nested alternative models.2

**Hypothesis Tests Results**

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. We tested our hypotheses using Edwards and Lambert’s (2007) path analytic procedures for moderated indirect effects models (see also MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). We tested all effects with bias-corrected confidence intervals from 1,000 bootstrapped estimates (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Additionally, in all equations predicting the dependent variables, we controlled for the direct effects of the independent variable, abusive supervision of the coworker. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the path analytic results of the model. Predictor variables were mean-centered, and interactions were plotted at high and low levels (± 1 SD) of each moderator (Aiken & West, 1991).

Hypothesis 1(a) predicted that third parties’ exclusion beliefs about the coworker would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision of the coworker and third parties’ anger such that the effects would be more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were lower than higher. The Abusive Supervision × Exclusion Beliefs interaction term was significant and negative on anger ($b = -0.36, p < .05$), and the relationship between abusive supervision and anger was more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were lower ($b = .76, p < .001$) rather than higher ($b = 0.30, p < .05$; see Figure 2a). Therefore, Hypothesis 1(a) was supported.

Hypothesis 1(b) predicted that third parties’ exclusion beliefs about the coworker would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision of the coworker and third parties’ contentment, such that the effects would be more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were higher than lower. The Abusive Supervision × Exclusion Beliefs interaction term

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2 Details of these comparison tests can be obtained by contacting the first author.
was significant and positive on contentment \((b = 0.23, p < .05)\), and the relationship between abusive supervision and contentment was more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were higher \((b = 0.24, p < .05)\) rather than lower \((b = -0.04, ns; see Figure 2b)\). These results support Hypothesis 1(b).

Hypothesis 2(a) predicted that third parties’ moral identity would moderate the relationship between third parties’ anger and supervisor-directed deviance, such that the effects would be more strongly positive when moral identity was lower rather than higher. The ANOVA \(\times\) Moral Identity interaction term was significant and negative on supervisor-directed deviance \((b = -0.11, p < .05)\), and the relationship between anger and supervisor-directed deviance was more strongly positive when moral identity was lower \((b = 0.11, p < .05)\) rather than higher \((b = -0.02, ns; see Figure 3a)\). These results support Hypothesis 2(a).

Hypothesis 2(b) predicted that third parties’ moral identity would moderate the relationship between third parties’ anger and coworker support, such that the effects would be more strongly positive when moral identity was higher than lower. The ANOVA \(\times\) Moral Identity interaction term was significant and positive on coworker support \((b = 0.22, p < .05)\), and the relationship between anger and coworker support was more strongly positive when moral identity was higher \((b = 0.15, p < .05)\) rather than lower \((b = -0.09, ns; see Figure 2b)\). Thus, Hypothesis 2(b) was supported.

Hypothesis 2(c) predicted that third parties’ moral identity would moderate the relationship between third parties’ contentment and coworker exclusion, such that the effects would be more strongly positive when moral identity was lower rather than higher. The Contentment \(\times\) Moral Identity interaction term was significant and negative on coworker exclusion \((b = -0.29, p < .01)\), and the relationship between contentment and coworker exclusion was more strongly positive when moral identity was lower \((b = 0.27, p < .01)\) rather than higher \((b = -0.04, ns; see Figure 3c)\). These results support Hypothesis 2(c).

We used the information from Tables 2 and 3 to compute the indirect effects of abusive supervision of the coworker on the dependent variables (via the mediators, anger and contentment) at higher and lower values of the moderators (exclusion beliefs and moral identity). Hypothesis 3(a) predicted that the indirect effects of abusive supervision of the coworker on supervisor-directed deviance (via anger) would be more strongly positive when exclusion

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>(M)</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Abusive supervision of the coworker</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Exclusion beliefs</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Anger</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Contentment</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Moral identity</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Supervisor-directed deviance</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>.81</td>
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<td>7. Coworker exclusion</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>0.74</td>
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<td>-.17</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Coworker support</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.26</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Supervisor similarity</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>-.49</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Third party gender</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Coworker gender</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Third party/coworker tenure</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Coefficient alpha values for the variables are shown in italics along the diagonal. Correlations greater than |.13| are significant at \(p < .05\) and those greater than |.17| are significant at \(p < .01\), two-tailed.

*N = 221.  \(1\) male, 2 = female.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path Analytic Results on Anger and Contentment</th>
<th>(b)</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
<th>(b)</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
<th>(b)</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predictors</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor similarity</td>
<td>-0.35**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third party gender(b)</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworker gender(b)</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third party/coworker tenure</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive supervision of the coworker</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion beliefs</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abusive supervision of the Coworker X Exclusion Beliefs</td>
<td>-0.36**</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equation (R^2)</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.37**</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\Delta R^2)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Beta values are unstandardized regression coefficients.

*N = 221.  \(1\) male, 2 = female.

*p < .10. \(** p < .05. \(*** p < .01.\)
beliefs were lower and moral identity was lower. The results support Hypothesis 3(a); the indirect effect of abusive supervision on supervisor-directed deviance was more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was lower ($p = .08, p < .05$) rather than when exclusion beliefs were higher and moral identity was higher ($p = .01, ns$), when exclusion beliefs were higher and moral identity was lower ($p = .03, ns$), or when exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was higher ($p = .11, ns$).

Hypothesis 3(b) predicted that the indirect effects of abusive supervision of the coworker on coworker support (via anger) would be more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was higher. The results support Hypothesis 3(b); the indirect effect of abusive supervision on coworker support was more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was higher ($p = .11, p < .05$) rather than when exclusion beliefs were higher and moral identity was higher ($p = .04, ns$), when exclusion beliefs were higher and moral identity was lower ($p = .03, ns$), or when exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was lower ($p = .07, ns$).

Hypothesis 3(c) predicted that the indirect effects of abusive supervision of the coworker-on-coworker exclusion (via contentment) would be more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were higher and moral identity was higher ($p = .04, ns$), when exclusion beliefs were higher and moral identity was lower ($p = .03, ns$), or when exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was lower ($p = .07, ns$).

Hypothesis 3(c) predicted that the indirect effects of abusive supervision of the coworker-on-coworker exclusion (via contentment) would be more strongly positive when exclusion beliefs were higher and moral identity was higher ($p = .04, ns$), when exclusion beliefs were higher and moral identity was lower ($p = .03, ns$), or when exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was lower ($p = .07, ns$).
exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was higher \((p = 0.00, \text{ns})\), or when exclusion beliefs were lower and moral identity was lower \((p = −0.01, \text{ns})\).

**Supplemental Model Tests Results**

Some scholars have speculated that moral identity might mitigate third parties’ emotional responses to another person’s mistreatment (e.g., O’Reilly & Aquino, 2011). Although our placement of moral identity at the second stage of our model is consistent with moral self theory (Blasi, 1984, 2004) and research (see Jennings et al., in press), we examined alternative models to test the effects of moral identity as a moderator at the first stage of our theoretical model. We also tested the possibility that exclusion beliefs moderated the effects of felt emotions on the behavioral reactions. Following protocol recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2007), we compared the results of our theoretical model (Figure 1) to results of alternative models. In the first alternative model, we specified moral identity as a moderator at the first stage of the hypothesized model, between abusive supervision of the coworker and the emotions. The results showed the Abusive Supervision of the Coworker \(\times\) Moral Identity interaction term was not significant on anger or contentment. In the second alternative model, we specified exclusion beliefs as a moderator at the second stage of the hypothesized model, between the emotions and the dependent variables. The results showed the Anger \(\times\) Exclusion Beliefs interaction term was not significant on supervisor-directed deviance or coworker support. The Contentment \(\times\) Exclusion Beliefs interaction term was significant on coworker exclusion, such that the positive relationship was stronger when exclusion beliefs were higher than lower. Thus, the indirect effect of abusive supervision of the coworker-on-coworker exclusion (via contentment) may be even stronger than what we reported earlier. Overall,
the supplemental analyses lend further support for our theorized model.

Discussion

The goal of our research was to examine third parties’ reactions to abusive supervision of a coworker. Extant work has demonstrated that third parties may react quite differently to witnessing a coworker be abused (Harris et al., 2013; Priesemuth, 2013). Our work sought to identify factors that motivate different reactions. The results of our study show that witnessed abusive supervision indirectly influences third parties’ behavioral reactions at higher and lower levels of their exclusion beliefs (whether third parties believe the target of abuse was deserving or not of mistreatment) and their moral identity. Exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse evoked different emotions from third parties. When exclusion beliefs were low, witnessing abusive supervision evoked anger. When exclusion beliefs were high, witnessing abusive supervision elicited contentment. The emotions experienced by our respondents motivated specific action tendencies. Third parties’ behavioral reactions were moderated by their moral identity, however, such that a strong moral identity assisted these third parties in resisting their desires to engage in harmful behavior and, instead, enhanced the likelihood that they engaged in ethically oriented acts. The results show that third parties with a stronger rather than weaker moral identity were less likely to direct harmful behavior toward the supervisor (i.e., supervisor-directed deviance) or targeted coworker (i.e., coworker exclusion) and were more likely to help the target of abuse (i.e., coworker support).

Theoretical Implications

Our work has a number of implications for theory and research. For instance, our work extends the abusive supervision literature to consider the impact of abusive supervision on third parties (cf. Folger, 2001). Our study suggests that abusive supervision elicits different reactions from third parties—those who become angry try to help the victim and harm the supervisor, and those who become contented perpetrate abusive behavior against targeted coworkers by excluding them. Consequently, this work demonstrates the importance of considering the larger social environment in which abusive supervision occurs and suggests third parties’ beliefs about the target of abuse matter. These beliefs influence third parties’ emotionally charged reactions from witnessing abusive supervision, which then motivates harmful behavior. Overall, the study suggests supervisor abuse initiates a spiral of destructive and costly behavior (cf. Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

This study also extends deontic principles by pointing out that a critical boundary condition to third party reactions is third parties’ beliefs about the target of mistreatment. Our work directly addresses the underlying assumption implied in prior work (see Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005)—that all third parties become angered by another’s abuse because they find mistreating others unfair—and demonstrates that third parties’ judgments about the abused coworker exert a strong influence on the nature of their reactions. Consistent with deontic reasoning, we show that third parties are guided by what they believe is “right.” However, our work extends the traditional deontic view by explaining why not all third parties believe what is “right” is to restore justice on behalf of the victimized coworker by harming the supervisor and providing the coworker with support. In contrast, some third parties believe that abusing the targeted coworker is “right” and, therefore, see continued abuse against that coworker (viz., exclusion) as appropriate. Not all third parties become angered by the mistreatment; instead, some feel contented about the abuse. This expanded view of deontic justice offers researchers the opportunity for a more comprehensive understanding of third parties’ reactions to mistreatment.

Our research also adds to the growing literature on victimization and victims as provocative targets. Prior work has shown that supervisors target abuse against employees who are aggravating and annoying (Tepper et al., 2011). Coworkers seemingly do the same. There may be many reasons for coworkers to hold strong exclusion beliefs about another employee. Theory (Deutsch, 1990; Feather, 2006) suggests that exclusion beliefs originate from a social comparison, wherein the target is considered inferior to the third party. It represents a “just deserts” ideal, such that mistreatment is perceived to be deserved because of some characteristic or behavior of the target. Our results suggest that when third parties hold high exclusion beliefs about particular coworkers, they are less bothered by negative events that befall the targets of abuse, but if third parties do not hold high exclusion beliefs, they are willing to “go to bat” for the targets of abuse and attempt to restore justice on the victims’ behalf.

Furthermore, the results of our research add to the literature on emotions and their influence on employees’ work behavior. Emotions have specific action tendencies that can impair employees’ abilities to engage in functional work behavior (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Consistent with these ideas, the results show that anger influenced supervisor-directed deviance and contentment influenced coworker exclusion. Coworker support only emerged when third parties held a strong moral identity; the direct effect of anger on coworker support was not significant ($b = 0.03$, $ns$). Further, abusive supervision of a coworker did not directly influence third parties’ contentment. It was only when third parties believed the targeted coworker was deserving of mistreatment (i.e., high exclusion beliefs) that third parties experienced contentment and were motivated to exclude the coworker. Thus, certain aspects of the situation and the individual provide important boundary conditions regarding the effects of emotion on affect-driven behaviors.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with all studies, ours is not without limitations. For instance, researchers have discussed potential issues that can arise from same-source data, with specific concerns about the nature of common method variance (CMV) bias. We argue, however, that given our research goal, a same-source data design was necessary. First, it was important to use the critical incident technique to focus respondents on the research purpose, namely, their reactions to the abusive supervision of a specific coworker. This design allowed us to examine the influence of exclusion beliefs, which was theorized as the focal variable that influences third parties’ differential reactions to abusive supervision. Asking focal respondents about their perceptions of the event and the targeted coworker, their emotions regarding the event, their own level of moral identity,
and their engaged behaviors resulting from the event could only be effectively assessed from the third party respondent. Supporting this idea, meta-analysis comparing self-reports to other-reports of sensitive data (such as abusive supervision, exclusion beliefs, engaged deviance, and engaged exclusion) demonstrate that self-reported data are more accurate than data collected from other-reports (C. Berry, Carpenter, & Barratt, 2012). Further, Lee (1993) argued that self-reports are more accurate because coworker and supervisors are often unaware of employees’ destructive work behavior (e.g., supervisor-directed deviance, coworker exclusion) until the employee has been caught and reprimanded. Second, asking the focal third party respondent to involve a coworker (who may be the target of abuse) or supervisor (who may be the abusive supervisor) to also rate his or her perceptions of the event or of the focal third party respondent’s attitudes or behaviors about the event (a particularly sensitive work situation) might unduly put the focal third party respondent at risk at work. Doing so might also have been problematic vis-à-vis institutional review board protocols and ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2010).

Given the need to collect data from the same source, we took several proactive steps to address the concerns related to CMV. First, we adopted design elements recommended by researchers (Podsakoff et al., 2012) that have been shown to reduce CMV. Specifically, we collected our criterion variables at a later time than the predictor and mediating variables. Researchers have demonstrated that CMV cannot present a bias to data when moderators are considered (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010); this research has shown that CMV would weaken, not strengthen, interactions. Thus, scholars (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Siemsen et al., 2010) have concluded that if an interaction effect is found, it should be taken as strong evidence that an interaction exists and that CMV did not present a bias. Notably, our results show significant interaction effects and that the indirect effects varied over levels of the two moderator variables. Last, we tested for CMV statistically. Following Williams, Hartman, and Cavazotte’s (2010) procedures, we used a latent marker variable to examine the extent to which CMV existed in our data. The results show CMV was not present and did not bias the findings.

A second area of concern relates to causality. As with all field and survey studies, causality cannot be conclusively determined. However, we took steps to enhance the nature of causality in our study. First, we ordered the variables in the data collection efforts in such a way to ensure the causal chain was accurately represented. The ordering of variables in the model was based on strong theory (e.g., Folger, 2012; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), as well as experimental research (e.g., Blader et al., 2013; Turillo et al., 2002) about the temporal experience of emotion and behavior. Second, we assessed our dependent variables at a separate time from our predictor variables, which scholars contend enhances causal inferences (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Nonetheless, we concede that examining the influence of exclusion beliefs in association with third parties’ reactions to witnessed abuse is challenging and, therefore, urge researchers to consider untangling the dynamics within an experimental setting.

Despite these limitations, our work can assist researchers in extending the literature further. In particular, because our work demonstrates that exclusion beliefs play a critical role in understanding how third parties react to abusive supervision of a co-worker, researchers might examine how exclusion beliefs form within the work environment. Scope of justice theory (Opotow, 1990, 1995) suggests that there are many reasons why individuals may exclude others (e.g., race, gender, personality, behavior). Our work did not focus on a specific reason for exclusion, but it is possible for different reasons of exclusion to differentially influence third parties’ reactions. We are hopeful researchers continue this line of work and explore the development of and further consequences of exclusion beliefs.

Additionally, our expanded view of deontic justice principles provides a foundation for research, such as examining other emotions that may emerge from witnessing another person be mistreated. The emotions studied in our article may be viewed as two extreme forms of emotional reactions: anger and contentment. The means for anger and contentment suggest that anger is a more prominent emotional experience, which is a good thing. Third parties, thus, are more distressed by—rather than cynical about—witnessing a coworker’s abuse. Still, third parties may also experience other types of emotions, such as being sad, scared, or intimidated about witnessing abusive supervision. It may also be possible for third parties to experience sympathy, compassion, or empathy for the abused coworker. Our work points to the need to study other emotions that might be evoked in third parties when they witness abusive supervision.

It would also be interesting for researchers to consider other third party behavioral reactions. For example, Mitchell et al. (2012) theorized that angered third parties might try to avenge the victim by approaching the supervisor to ask that the abuse stop or by reporting the supervisor to authorities; contented third parties may try to encourage others to exclude and abuse the victim or engage in more aggressive behaviors against the target of abuse (e.g., aggression, undermining). More work is needed to fully explore third parties’ reactions.

Additionally, we see value in researchers exploring the effects of contentment from another’s mistreatment. Research on schadenfreude—a sense of joy or pleasure experienced because of another’s mistreatment or misfortune (Feather, 2006)—has received limited attention within organizational research. The results of our work suggest that schadenfreude motivates destructive behavior against the source of contentment. Feather (2006) argued that work environment pressures may make the experience of schadenfreude more likely to occur. Given this, there is much to learn about the organizational and interpersonal work factors that contribute to schadenfreude or related emotions, such as envy or jealousy.

Although our research shows that abusive supervision influences third parties’ reactions, it is possible for the third party to also be a target of abusive supervision and that the supervisor may abuse the entire work unit. If this were the case, the abuse may...
suggest to third parties that the abuse of a coworker is not targeted. Given this, it is possible for third parties who are also abused to become even more angry about abuse of a peer—someone, like themselves, who is underserving of abuse (i.e., low exclusion beliefs). Yet, third parties who are also abused might be less angered because they see the abuse as simply a climate issue (Ogunfowora, 2013), which may temper affective and behavioral reactions. Researchers should explore these ideas further.

Finally, we asked participants in our study to refer to a specific coworker (who was abused) and a specific supervisor (the abuser). This design was necessary to examine third parties’ exclusion beliefs about the target of abuse. However, research may consider other designs to explore third party reactions. For example, examining third party reactions more generally may reduce the risk placed on the third party to recruit other sources to participate in the study. Researchers might also consider exploring third party reactions within experimental settings. We understand, however, that testing a full range of third party reactions in a lab may be impossible, as lab settings may be insufficient to elicit realistic (taboo) reactions (King, Hebl, Morgan, & Ahmad, 2013), such as experienced contentment from witnessing abusive supervision. Further, some aspects of organizations may be difficult to capture or might be overlooked within a lab setting (Heath & Sitkin, 2001). Thus, researchers might explore the effects over a course of studies that may infer the process by which behavioral reactions occur (cf. Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005).

Implications for Practice

Our findings underscore the importance for organizations to control the incidence of abusive supervision, as our results show abusive supervision impacts the larger workgroup and, specifically, third party witnesses. Prior estimates of abusive supervision suggest that abusing subordinates produces high costs to organizations through its impact on victims and victims’ behavioral reactions (e.g., lawsuits, health costs; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). These estimates, however, did not consider the consequences imposed on or by third parties. Taking third parties’ reactions into account suggests that the costs of abusive supervision to organizations are even greater, as our study demonstrates third parties can perpetuate destructive behavior within organizations from witnessing abuse (i.e., supervisor-directed deviance, coworker exclusion). Although on the face of things, third parties directing deviance at an abusive supervisor might seem to be a positive reaction, these types of behaviors (and coworker exclusion) have been found to be quite costly to organizations (e.g., Detert et al., 2007; Dunlop & Lee, 2004). They wreak havoc on the interpersonal dynamics needed to foster productive work behavior among employees and within business units (cf. Sutton, 2010).

A positive takeaway, then, is that some third parties engaged in more constructive reactions by way of coworker support. These types of reactions can clearly help organizational decision makers uncover incidents of abusive supervision. Moreover, they may assist with fostering a compassionate and supportive business environment. Yet, our results suggest that harnessing third parties’ empathic reactions to aid the abused coworker may be challenging. That is, the results of our study demonstrate that third parties who were angered by witnessing the abuse only engaged in supportive behaviors when they also held a strong moral identity. Thus, our study underscores the importance of organizational decision makers fostering ethical behaviors that more easily enable employees’ moral identity. Organizations can do so by communicating the importance of ethical behavior and emphasizing accountability to these standards, as research has shown that increasing awareness to moral standards strengthens moral identity (Aquino et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Our overall theoretical model and results suggest that third parties’ reactions may contribute to the costs of abusive supervision. Although prosocial behaviors (i.e., coworker support) did emerge, more destructive behaviors were also probable. Evoked anger from witnessed abuse motivated supervisor-directed deviance, whereas evoked contentment from witnessed abuse motivated coworker exclusion. These effects were even stronger when third parties held a weak moral identity. Because these behaviors can be a source of a financial drain on organizations (e.g., Dunlop & Lee, 2004), decision makers should focus efforts on reducing the incidence of abusive supervision and enhancing relational skills that can assist third parties in fostering effective and ethical interpersonal dynamics for organizations.

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