

**When an Amoral's Power is Threatened:  
Psychopaths and Their Engagement in Abusive Supervision**

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Master Thesis

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## **Abstract**

In this research, I investigated the role played by leader psychopathy in determining abusive supervision. Based on an integration of insights from research on psychopathy and fear of power loss, I hypothesized that leader psychopathy is positively related to leader abusive supervision. Furthermore, I hypothesized that the positive relationship between psychopathy and leader abusive supervision would be strengthened by leader fear of power loss. To test the hypotheses, I ran a dyadic leader-employee field study consisting of 140 dyads. The results support the first hypothesis that psychopathy is positively related to leader abusive supervision. However, I did not find support for the second hypothesis, predicting an interaction between leader psychopathy and fear of power loss predicting abusive supervision. I discuss the results, implications, and limitations of the study.

*Keywords:* leader psychopathy, abusive supervision, fear of power loss, toxic leadership

## **When an Amoral's Power is Threatened:**

### **Psychopaths and Their Engagement in Abusive Supervision**

"You screwed up again. Can't you do something right for once and give me your cell phone if you have got nothing to hide? If you don't do it, it proves you don't care about your colleagues, and everyone will know it." "I hate getting into fights, but you make me so mad with your stupidity! Let me see if I can put this in simple terms that even you can understand" (Pietrangelo, 2019, p. 1-2). These example quotes vividly illustrate what is referred to as abusive supervision. The way supervisors communicate with their employees may entail condescension, manipulation, accusations, or ignoration (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Pietrangelo, 2019; Tepper, 2007). Abusive superiors repeatedly engage in these behaviors in the workplace with the purpose of controlling or frightening their employees. As a result, the subordinates' motivation declines, they become discontent with their job, and their productivity declines (Ashforth, 1994; Hegele-Raih, 2020). Additionally, abusive supervision may lead to increased stress levels (Richman et al. 1992; Tepper, 2007), which in turn may evoke aggressive behavior towards colleagues, supervisors, or even private contacts, thus further deteriorating workspace climate.

Serious cases of abusive supervision towards one single employee cost between 17,000 and 24,000 US dollars per company (Hegele-Raih, 2020), and are associated with high turnover rates. These, in turn, cost companies billions of dollars every year (Croom, 2021; Hall, 2019). Previous research has shown that abusive supervision leads to several negative consequences such as e. g. decreased creativity, decreased self-esteem, and lower engagement in organizational citizenship behavior (Ashforth, 1994; Hegele-Raih, 2020), a type of behavior beneficial to the company and employees. Given all these negative effects of abusive supervision, it is important to understand what factors may influence leaders to engage in these behaviors.

There is reason to believe that leader psychopathy might be associated with abusive supervision. Psychopathy is characterized by lack of remorse and self-serving behavior. Psychopaths tend to be uninhibited and follow their aggressive impulses (Patrick, 2009). Previous research has shown that psychopaths see their ideas as better than others', do not show understanding, and put their employees under pressure (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Furthermore, individuals with psychopathic tendencies can engage in harmful behavior towards others without feeling remorse (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Harmful psychopathic characteristics have also been linked to abusive supervision in the past (Richman et al. 1992). Therefore, I argue that psychopathy is positively associated with abusive supervision.

Previous research suggests that when leaders feel incompetent or compete with others for their power, they tend to blame others for their own mistakes or defeat (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Moreover, when people with psychopathic traits feel threatened in their power, they try to re-establish their positive self-image by mistreating and making subordinates accountable for their own mistakes (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) in an aggressive manner (Cho & Fast, 2012). Therefore, since psychopaths like and want to conserve their power, I postulate it is more likely that they will engage in abusive supervision when threatened. Therefore, I argue that fear of power loss amplifies psychopathic tendencies. In short, this study focuses on the maladaptive effect of psychopathy and fear of power loss on abusive supervision.

### **Abusive Supervision**

Several researchers have investigated the antecedents of destructive supervisor behavior (Ashforth, 1994; Duffy et al., 2002; Schat et al., 2006; Tepper, 2000; Tepper, 2007). Abusive supervision, which is defined as "the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), is a subjective judgment by subordinates based on the supervisor's

behavior (Tepper, 2007). That means that the same supervisor can be seen as non-abusive in a different context or by different employees. Examples of abusive supervision include intimidation tactics, ignoring employees, withholding important information, as well as humiliating or shaming an employee in public (Keashly, 1997; Tepper, 2000). Usually, abusive supervision continues until the employee or supervisor terminates the relationship or until the supervisor modifies their behavior (Jezl, et al., 1996). Common reasons for employees to keep working for an abusive supervisor are financial dependence, weakness, or hope for change in the supervisor's behavior (Walker et al., 1997).

While some leaders may show abusive supervision with the intent to evoke better performance (Tepper, 2000), in other cases abusive supervisors use their authority position for personal gain and display little consideration for their employees. It comes as no surprise to see that abusive supervision has been linked to various outcomes with undesirable connotations, such as lower job performance (Harris et al., 2007), employees' psychological distress (Richman et al. 1992), declines in job satisfaction (Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2004), lower organizational commitment (Duffy et al., 2002; Tepper, 2000), aggressive behavior towards coworkers (Schat et al., 2006), and deviant organizational behaviors (Duffy et al., 2002). Employees who feel abused mainly retaliate against their boss in manners that do not violate their official job description. Examples of that are decreases in initiative, lower trust in the supervisor, decreased courteous attitude, and fewer citizenship behaviors (Tepper, 2001). Due to higher absenteeism, healthcare costs, less productive work in general, and increased turnover rates (Ashforth, 1994), abusive supervision is costly for companies (Tepper et al., 2006). Therefore, investigating its antecedents may give a more detailed overview of its genesis and potential preventative measures, to avoid high costs to companies as well as ensure better health for employees.

Comparatively to the consequences of abusive supervision, only a little research has been done about its antecedents. Previous research suggests that leaders' personality traits can be an antecedent for their abusive supervision or toxic leadership behavior (Tepper, 2007; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016; Wu & LeBreton, 2011). Supervisors high on hostility will be more likely to act out against weak and vulnerable employees, as they represent 'safe' targets (Tepper et al., 2006). In line with this, supervisors with a stronger hostile attribution bias were more likely to show abusive supervision towards employees (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Dark triad traits such as Machiavellianism and psychopathy have been associated with abusive supervision and some of the Dark Triad meta-analyses also suggest that (Ellen et al., 2021).

However, situational factors may also play an important role in evoking abusive supervision practices among supervisors. When supervisors have experienced procedural injustice, they tend to act more abusively towards their subordinates afterward (Aquino et al., 1999; Tepper 2004). Aryee et al. (2007) found that supervisors who were exposed to interactional injustice were found to be more abusive towards their employees, especially when they held the belief that dominance and control were legitimate forms of leadership and that subordinates should show unquestioning obedience to authority. Further, being faced with actual or perceived aggression may, in turn, evoke aggression (Aquino & Douglas, 2003), and organizational norms of aggression and hostility may enable abusive leadership, as in those contexts it may seem the appropriate and legitimate way to enforce authority (Tepper, 2007). Oftentimes, abusive supervisors treat their employees in a toxic way because it is easily overlooked since organizations are often more focused on profit than on healthy leadership styles (Eissa & Lester, 2021).

### **Psychopathy and Abusive Supervision**

The Dark Triad which is composed of psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism has been related to abusive behavior before (Ellen et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2018;

Höflinger et al., 2020). For instance, previous research has directly linked Machiavellianism, which is characterized by callous affect and cynicism (Belschak et al., 2020; Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009), to abusive supervision (Kiazid et al., 2010). Similarly, narcissists tend to act unethically and to commit fraud (Harrison et al., 2018) which could escalate into abusive leadership behavior (Kiazid et al., 2010). Since there is little research on psychopathy and abusive supervision, but it looks like it might influence it, I will aim to explore the relationship between psychopathy and abusive leadership behavior.

From a subclinical perspective, psychopathy is characterized by chronic antisocial tendencies (Levenson, 1992), manipulative behavior (Jonason & Webster, 2010), and rationalizing deceitful behavior (Harrison et al., 2016; Harrison et al., 2018). Individuals who score high on primary psychopathy traits follow aggressive impulses (Patrick, 2009), have difficulty with showing remorse (Jonason & Webster, 2010), and exhibit behavioral deviance and resilience when confronted with emotional situations (Patrick, 2009). They are non-agreeable people who use conscienceless strategies to fulfill their selfish goals, also in a predatory manner, at the cost of others' well-being without feeling guilty (Jonason & Webster, 2010) because they lack social awareness even in a professional context (Harrison et al., 2018). At their essence, psychopaths have a propensity for maladaptive behaviors such as recklessness, manipulation, exploitation, low conscientiousness, and high neuroticism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). They lack inhibition and therefore tend to struggle with impulse control which can be harmful to people who depend on them (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Subclinical psychopaths exhibit self-enhancement and tend to overestimate their mental capacity (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). They may thrive in chaotic business environments and leadership roles within a high-stress context (Babiak et al. 2010) because they are decisive individuals who are open to risk-taking. In this regard, psychopathy has been related to toxic and unethical behavior at the workplace (Harrison et al., 2018), such as

maladaptive behavior towards employees (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). Moreover, it has been associated with bullying in the work context, low individual consideration, and corporate misbehavior (Harrison et al., 2018). In sum, given that subclinical psychopathy is characterized by a lack of empathy, impulsivity, lack of guilt and remorse, and aggressive tendencies, I predict that leader psychopathy will be positively associated with leader abusive supervision.

**Hypothesis 1:** Leader psychopathy is positively related to leader abusive supervision.

### **Fear of Power Loss as a Moderator of the Relationship Between Psychopathy and Abusive Supervision**

However, a leader's behavior is not only determined by individual characteristics but also by contextual factors (Aung & Aris, 1995). To this end, there is reason to believe that fear of power loss might strengthen the effects that leader psychopathy has on leader abusive supervision, and I will explain this in more detail below.

Being in a power position can be beneficial because the leader can disregard the needs or desires of others and asymmetrically focus on their own goals (Mooijman et al., 2019). Usually, people in power positions have worked very hard over a long time and made sacrifices by prioritizing working towards their goal of attaining power. Therefore, powerful people generally value their power and want to maintain it (Fehr et al., 2013; Saguy & Kteily, 2014). In an organizational context, leaders often must deal with potential rivals who aspire to take over their power position (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Those competitors can be the leader's subordinates who are motivated to get promoted to have access to valuable resources (Wisse et al., 2019). Prior research suggests that people faced with potential power loss deal with increased stress levels and correspondingly have lower self-control and might act impulsively or potentially abusively towards their employees (Jordan et al., 2011).



According to Aung and Aris (1995), it is not the power itself that makes people corrupt. It rather is the fear of losing their power caused by instability, low status, competence doubts, or illegitimacy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). With the purpose to conserve their power position, leaders may be pushed into striving to maintain their power position at all costs even if that entails abusing their power by engaging in harmful and abusive behavior towards others (Belle & Cantarelli, 2017; Wisse et al., 2019). Previous research has indeed shown that fear of power loss leads to dysfunctional behaviors aimed at protecting and maintaining this power. For instance, leaders would disregard the subordinates' wishes and engage in selfishly motivated supervision in the hope it helps them maintain their power. To downplay their competition's potential, they might not acknowledge their employee's successful work (Jordan et al., 2011) or take credit for their coworker's work to look more suited for the leadership position than their colleagues. In extreme cases, to feel superior towards their subordinates and more secure in their power position, leaders might ignore or insult the employees, or even make them responsible for the leaders' own mistakes (Wisse et al., 2019).

Several reasons might suggest that fear of power loss might strengthen the relationship between leader psychopathy and abusive supervision. First, psychopaths enjoy and value the benefits derived from having a powerful leadership position (Boyle et al., 2015; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Moreover, they see their own negative emotions as a consequence of someone else's actions (Chabrol et al., 2009) and they avail themselves in controlling people due to the mistaken belief that control is all they need to feel fulfilled (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Therefore, they typically feel more confident when having power over other people and might get paranoid when losing control (Leary & Hoyle, 2009). To this end, when faced with potential power loss they are likely to try to hold on to their power by all means. Moreover, due to their selfish worldview and lack of moral identity (Jonason & Webster, 2010), psychopaths are unlikely to consider other people's emotions (Chabrol et al., 2009;

Holland, 2020) when defending their power (Paulhus & Williams, 2002;). Therefore, I argue that they are especially likely to engage in abusive supervision when they are facing potential losses.

Second, perceived aggression can be individually interpreted differently, and especially for people who interpret a lot of aggression into another person's behavior, perceived aggression can evoke aggression in the perceiver. When individuals feel attacked in an aggressive manner, that can evoke an aggressive defensive reaction (Aquino, 2000; Buss, 1961; Tepper, 2007). This could especially be the case for psychopaths who may feel a stronger need to re-establish control (Tepper, 2007). When psychopaths feel threatened in any way, they lash out and behave impulsively without any empathy on how that may affect subordinates (Blair, 2010). Therefore, psychopathy and fear of power loss might be more harmful in combination. When psychopaths, fear losing power, they are more likely to engage in abuse because they are willing to defend their power position regardless of how other individuals are affected by their behavior. Therefore, I argue that a fear of power loss might strengthen psychopathic leaders' tendency to engage in abusive supervision. In sum, I posit that:

**Hypothesis 2:** Fear of power loss strengthens the positive relationship between leader psychopathy and leader abusive supervision.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

I collected dyadic data from a Dutch sample of 140 supervisor-subordinate pairs by using an online field survey. In total, I approached 196 manager-employee pairs, out of which 140 pairs were retained for further analysis. For purposes of the present study, I excluded 56 manager-employee pairs from the analysis, as one of the two did not complete the survey to a

sufficient degree ( $N = 18$ ), failed the attention checks ( $N = 33$ ), or indicated their data should not be used ( $N = 5$ ).

Out of the managers participating, 50.7% were female, 47.9% were male, and 1.4% identified as 'other'. Managers' ages ( $M = 41.49$ ,  $SD = 12.38$ ) ranged from 22 to 77 years, the time they worked with their employees ranged from less than six months (10%) to more than five years (12.10%), the amount of time they saw their employees post-covid varied from seldom or not at all (12.1%) to very often (13.6%), hours worked per week varied from eight hours or less (0.7%) to the majority of 33 to 40 hours (68.6%). Managers' educational level ranged from lower education (1.4%) to having achieved a university degree (22.9%), with the largest percentage having obtained a degree at a college or similar institution (47.1%). On the employees' side, 37.9% were male and 62.1% were female. Employees' ages ( $M = 32.94$ ,  $SD = 13.35$ ) ranged from 16 to 63 years, and hours worked per week ranged from eight or fewer hours (14.3%) to 33 to 40 hours (40%). The largest number of employees obtained a degree from in higher vocational education or similar level (30%), 42 employees obtained a degree from a community college or similar level (22.1%), and 27 employees obtained a degree from a university (19.3%).

According to the manager questionnaires, company sizes ranged from less than 50 coworkers (35%) via 50 to 250 coworkers (29.3%) to more than 250 coworkers (35.7%), as indicated by manager responses. Employee responses roughly equaled these values. Based on the managers' responses, a large proportion worked in the healthcare sector (17.9%) and service jobs (e.g., retail; 11.4%). Participants did not receive any financial compensation for participating in the survey.

## **Procedure**

Firstly, I obtained approval from the Ethics Committee for the survey for the data collection. Data were collected collaboratively with a group of 14 other students completing

their Bachelor's thesis. I collected the data by sending the link of the employee and supervisor online questionnaires to matched pairs of Dutch managers and employees. These potential participants I found in my personal networks, via social media, and by contacting HR departments of various Dutch companies. I matched employee and supervisor data by asking for a code consisting of the last two letters of the supervisor's surname, the last two letters of the employee's last name, and the first two letters of the company name. If they did not fill in the survey, they received a reminder four days after they received the link.

For parsimony's sake, only the variables relevant to the present study will be described in detail, although the overall questionnaire included various other measures. The main variables of interest included leader psychopathy, fear of power loss, and leader abusive supervision, as well as the control variables Machiavellianism and agentic narcissism.

After giving their informed consent, participants gave information on their demographic background. Following this, participants filled in one of the two questionnaires that fit their position. The manager questionnaire measured leader psychopathy, fear of power loss, agentic narcissism, and Machiavellianism. The employee questionnaire measured leader abusive supervision. Fourteen students of a Bachelor thesis group used the remaining sections of the questionnaire, which assessed constructs of low relevance regarding the present study, burnout, occupational self-efficacy, experience with losing power, ethical leadership, a threat to leader power, leader effectiveness, power perception of leader and self-serving behavior, Completion of the questionnaire took about 18 minutes in total. I ensured anonymity and confidentiality to the participants of the study. All questions were in Dutch but are translated into English below.

## **Measures**

**Leader Psychopathy.** The items assessing leader psychopathy were taken from the 16-item primary psychopathy subscale by Levenson et al. (1995). These questions were answered by the managers and included items such as “*The main goal in my life is to get as much ownership and luxury things as possible*”, with response options ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree* on a Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha for this scale indicates robust internal consistency ( $\alpha = .82$ ) in the original study and strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .89$ ) in the present sample.

**Fear of Power Loss.** In order to assess fear of power loss, I used the 3-item scale developed by Wisse et al. (2019). The response options for the managers ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. A sample item would be “*I sometimes feel like some of my employees want my position*”. Cronbach's alpha for this scale indicates acceptable internal consistency ( $\alpha = .76$ ) in the original study, and ( $\alpha = .77$ ) in the present sample.

**Leader Abusive Supervision.** Leader abusive supervision was measured with 15 questions developed by Tepper (2000). Employees indicated the extent to which they agreed (1 = *never* to 5 = *often*; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .95$ ) with, for example, the following statement: “*My supervisor makes fun of me*”.

### **Control Variables**

Together with Machiavellianism and narcissism, psychopathy is part of the dark triad. The personalities composing it share several overlapping and intertwined features (Fehr et al., 1992; Gustafson & Ritzer, 1995; McHoskey, 1995; McHoskey et al., 1998; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Moreover, some dark triad components have been related to leader abusive supervision (Kiazid et al., 2010). Given these associations, agentic narcissism and Machiavellianism are controlled for as potential covariates in this study.

**Agentic Narcissism.** I used manager's agentic narcissism as a control variable which I measured with the 16-item NPI-16 developed by Ames et al. (2006). The authors indicate this

measure to have notable internal, discriminant, and predictive validity, and may serve as an adequate measure when the full NPI scale cannot be administered. The response options ranged from 0 = *narcissism-inconsistent* to 1 = *narcissism-consistent*. A sample question would be “*When other people compliment me, I sometimes get shy*” vs. “*I know I’m good because everyone keeps telling me that*”. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale indicates strong internal consistency ( $\alpha=.95$ ). The original consistency of the NPI-16 was adequate at  $\alpha = .72$  (Ames et al., 2006). Like the original scale, I computed scale mean scores, with values close to 0 indicating no or low levels of agentic narcissism, and values close to 1 indicating high agentic narcissism.

***Machiavellianism.*** Machiavellianism was included as a control variable, measured with an 8-item scale by Christie and Geis (1970) and translated into Dutch by Hartog and Belschak (2012) in the leader survey. The response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. A sample question would be “*The best way to interact with people is to tell them what they want to hear.*” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale indicates robust internal consistency ( $\alpha=.85$ ), similar to the one found in the original study ( $\alpha = .84$ )

## Results

### Preliminary Analysis

I did not detect any extreme outliers in any of the variables used. In order to conduct a multiple linear regression analysis, I checked whether the relevant assumptions of linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity were met. Only for the relationship between primary psychopathy ( $M = 1.70$ ;  $SD = .51$ ) and abusive supervision ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) was the assumption of linearity violated ( $r = .50$ ,  $\alpha < .01$ ). I determined the relationship between leader abusive supervision and the other fear of power loss ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), between leader abusive supervision and agentic narcissism ( $M = .28$ ,  $SD = .19$ ) and between leader abusive supervision and Machiavellianism ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). Further, residuals were not

normally distributed. However, following recommendations by Stevens and Pituch (2016), no transformation of the data was conducted as the sample size exceeds 50. Finally, I detected no multicollinearity.

After this, I assessed the correlations between the study variables, namely, leader psychopathy, fear of power loss, leader abusive supervision, and potential covariates such as narcissism and Machiavellianism. The correlations between all variables were positive. The correlation between psychopathy and leader abusive supervision is moderate to high ( $r = .50$ ,  $\alpha < .01$ ), between psychopathy and fear of power loss moderate ( $r = .48$ ,  $\alpha < .01$ ), and between fear of power loss and abusive supervision low ( $r = .29$ ,  $\alpha < .01$ ). The correlations between psychopathy and the covariates are moderate to high for agentic narcissism ( $r = .64$ ,  $\alpha < .01$ ) and high for Machiavellianism ( $r = .78$ ,  $\alpha < .01$ ). Correlations between the covariates and the dependent variable leader abusive supervision are moderate for narcissism ( $r = .45$ ,  $\alpha < .01$ ) and moderate for Machiavellianism ( $r = .38$ ,  $\alpha < .01$ ). All means, standard deviations, and correlations can be found in Table 1.

### **Hypothesis Testing/Main analysis**

In order to test the hypotheses, two linear regression analyses were conducted: one with Machiavellianism and agentic narcissism as control variables, one without.

First, I conducted a hierarchical regression analysis in which leader abusive supervision was predicted by main effect terms for leader psychopathy and fear of power loss at step 1 and by adding the interaction term between leader psychopathy and fear of power loss at step 2. Following Cohen et al. (2003), the predictor variables were centered, and the main effect and interaction terms were based on the centered scores.

Step 1 explained a significant proportion of variance in leader abusive supervision (see Table 2). In line with Hypothesis 1, leader psychopathy positively significantly predicted leader abusive supervision ( $b = .45$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95%  $CI [.29;.61]$ ). Fear of power loss

did not significantly predict leader abusive supervision ( $b = .02$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p = .43$ , 95%  $CI [-.04; .08]$ ). Step 2 did not explain an additional significant proportion of variance in leader abusive supervision, and we did not find support for Hypothesis 2, predicting an interaction between psychopathy and fear of power loss ( $b = .08$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $CI [-.01; .16]$ ).

Second, I conducted a hierarchical regression analysis in which leader abusive supervision was predicted by the control variables (Machiavellianism and narcissism) at step 1. Furthermore, at step 2 I added the main effect terms for psychopathy and fear of power loss as predictors of abusive supervision and at step 3 I included the interaction term of psychopathy and fear of power loss (see Table 3).

At step 1, Machiavellianism emerged as a significant positive predictor of leader abusive supervision ( $b = .01$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $CI [.02; .18]$ ). Agentic narcissism did not significantly predict leader abusive supervision ( $b = .89$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $CI [.46; 1.33]$ ). When I included psychopathy at step 2, Machiavellianism was not significant anymore, but psychopathy was significant ( $b = .33$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $CI [.07; .60]$ ) which is in line with Hypothesis 1. Fear of power loss ( $b = .02$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p = .44$ ,  $CI [-.04; .08]$ ) did not significantly predict leader abusive supervision. In Step 3 I included the interaction term of psychopathy and fear of power loss ( $b = .01$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .22$ ,  $CI [-.03; .14]$ ) which did not explain an additional significant proportion of variance in leader abusive supervision. Therefore, I found no support for Hypothesis 2 predicting an interaction effect between psychopathy and fear of power loss.

## **Discussion**

Abusive supervision which is prevalent in organizations is harmful to companies since it leads to a drastic drop in productivity and motivation on the subordinates' front. Understanding the antecedents of abusive supervision is important in order to prevent it and to predict corresponding business outcomes (Cremer & Moore, 2019). In the present study, I



predicted that psychopathy positively influences leader abusive supervision and that this relationship is moderated by fear of power loss. The results of my study suggest that psychopathy is indeed positively related to abusive supervision, thereby finding support for Hypothesis 1.

Although predicted, I found no support for Hypothesis 2 suggesting that fear of power loss moderates the relationship between psychopathy and abusive supervision.

### **Theoretical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

My study contributes to the literature on abusive supervision, psychopathy, and fear of power loss. First, my finding that psychopathy is positively related to abusive supervision is in line with other research suggesting that psychopathy may be associated with aggression (Jones & Neria, 2015; Jones & Paulhus, 2010), employee oppression (Baughman et al., 2012), and with toxic leadership behavior at the workplace (Mathieu & Babiak, 2016).

Second, I did not find support for the interaction hypothesis of leader psychopathy and fear of power loss predicting leader abusive supervision. That might be the case because of the high correlation between leader psychopathy and fear of power loss or potentially because the sample was too small to detect an interaction. Future research could therefore aim for bigger samples in order to find a potential interaction effect.

The present study investigated antecedents of abusive supervision. A way to prevent abusive behaviors at the workplace is by encouraging leaders to do the opposite which is engaging in ethical behaviors. Cremer and Moore (2019) identified the antecedents for ethical behavior at work by getting to the core of the social-psychological approach in identifying the processes that lead employees to engage in moral or unethical work behavior. In practice, it can be difficult to recognize unethical behavior in a complex work environment. The difficulties in recognizing ethics in the work context originate from the ambiguity and

subjectivity in perceiving a leader's motives and character traits (Lemoine et al., 2019).

Therefore, the question arises of how ethical behavior is defined and how one can recognize unethical behavior. According to the philosopher Kant's deontological approach morality is defined as adhering to a system of rules, disregarding the feelings the outcome evokes in others (Paton, 1971). Ethical leaders encourage their employees to engage in moral behavior and are often intolerant against non-compliance (Mayer et al., 2013). There is no clear evidence for ethical leadership being beneficial for the well-being of employees. Therefore, future research should focus on what effect ethical leadership has on subordinates and why it is supposed to be desirable.

Moreover, the present study's findings show that psychopathic behavior at work is a predictor of abusive supervision. Therefore, it could be helpful to find a way to observe and control abusive behavior at work. Monitoring systems and punishment for unethical and abusive workplace behavior do not seem to be effective because they can create feelings of distrust towards the employees (Mulder et al. 2006). On the other hand, monitoring systems could work if ethical behavior gets rewarded rather than unethical behavior being punished (Cremer & Moore, 2019). Therefore, I suggest that research should be done about how to encourage ethical behavior over abusive behavior within companies in order to create an ethical work climate. Future research could, for example, focus on creating a reward system for organizations that encourages moral work behavior.

The present study focuses on abusive leadership being determined by dispositional psychopathy which is a hugely genetic and therefore a predictable component (Werner et al., 2015). However, moral behavior could also be a result of the context of the work environment. Despite the present study not confirming fear of power loss as a significant predictor for abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior or turnover intentions could create grounds for a leader acting abusively (Cremer & Moore, 2019). Other contextual

reasons for acting abusively are when a leader's self-regulatory resources are depleted which can be due to sleep deprivation (Barnes et al. 2011), high cognitive load (Gino et al. 2011), or being under performance pressure (Mitchell et al. 2019). Therefore, a highly regulatory demanding work context can lead to lower moral behaviors. Future research should investigate how a work environment can be altered to not create a ground for abusive work behaviors. Ideas for that are creating a less stressful work environment to reduce cognitive load and cutting down on weekly working hours so supervisors and workers can get enough time off work to recover.

However, a very crucial aspect is that a lot of abusive supervision never gets revealed in any case because employees in a low power position are often less likely to speak up because they want to maintain a good image in front of their boss (Kennedy & Anderson 2017). When subordinates voice moral objections they often encounter poor reactions because they are not perceived to have the legitimate power to do so (Tangirala et al. 2013; Wellman et al. 2016). In order to detect abusive supervision more frequently, future research could aim to investigate how to create an environment in which employees feel comfortable speaking about the toxic behavior of their boss.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Clearly, this study has a number of strengths and limitations. A strength of the present study is that I used a dyadic setup which gives the study lower demand characteristics than self-report (Himmelfarb & Lickteig, 1982). Another strength is that this was a field study that has higher ecological validity than, for example, a laboratory experiment.

A weakness is that I used a correlational design for this study which means that the results are mute regarding causality. Solutions for that can be using experimental designs or longitudinal designs for future research. Another point of contention for the quality of the data

is the manner in which the participants were recruited. Employees are more likely to give the questionnaire to their supervisors if they are on good terms with them. Vice versa, a boss is more likely to give the questionnaire to an employee that they like. Therefore, the results might be biased in favor of both the supervisors and subordinates. Future research should aim to avoid this bias by finding different ways of recruiting the participants for example by contacting Human Resources departments that choose which supervisors and employees get matched rather than the participants choosing themselves.

Another limitation of this research is that it was conducted in the Netherlands which is a relatively low power distance country. In lower power distance countries, abusive supervision tends to be evaluated more negatively by the employees than in higher power distance countries (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). Therefore, in a country with higher power distance, supervisors would be rated differently than in the present study. Future research could focus on the impact of cultural power distance differences in perceived abusive supervision.

### **Practical Implications**

The following suggestions are only based on a single study and therefore should be read with caution. Based on the findings of the present study, one way to prevent abusive supervision is by not hiring psychopaths for leadership positions. For that reason, an implication for businesses is to implement screening for psychopathy in their selection procedures. An easy way to assess subclinical psychopathy in a job selection procedure would be to use self-report scales, for example, Levenson's self-report of psychopathy (Levenson et al., 1995) that I used in the present study. Checking for psychopathy in the assessment centers could help to identify people who have psychopathic tendencies at the time of the interview and therefore to eliminate hiring psychopaths. This selection procedure does not fully

preclude getting psychopaths in a company. Even though psychopathy has a strong genetic component, a leader's psychopathic traits may get triggered in highly competitive and high-pressure work environments (Cremer & Moore, 2019). A solution for that could be that companies focus on creating a more cooperative and less competitive work environment.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, I looked at leader psychopathy and fear of power loss as antecedents of leader abusive supervision. This is important because abusive and unethical leadership behavior negatively affects organizational performance and disrupts its effectiveness (Hegele-Raih, 2020). As predicted, I found psychopathy to be a significant predictor for leader abusive supervision. However, I did not find support for the predicted interaction between leader psychopathy and fear of power in predicting leader abusive supervision, which therefore warrants future research. I hope that this study has inspired future research to investigate other potential individual-level and situational antecedents of abusive supervision.

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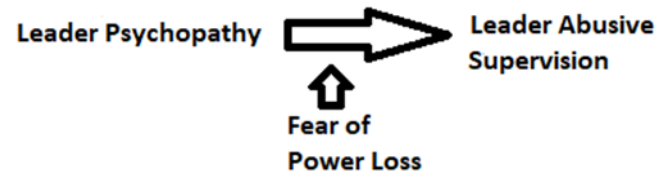
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**Figures****Figure 1***Research Model*

## Appendix A

**Table 1**

*Descriptives: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations among the Study Variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Leader Psychopathy	1.70	.51	-	.48***	.50***	.78***	.64***
(2) Fear of Power Loss	2.61	1.39		-	.29**	.40***	.31***
(3) Leader Abusive Supervision	1.28	.49			-	.38***	.45***
(4) Machiavellianism	2.57	1.06				-	.48***
(5) Agentic Narcissism	.28	.19					-

*Note.* Cronbach's alphas are displayed on the diagonal.  $N = 140$  dyads (listwise).

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 2**

*Regression Analyses Table Without Controls: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses  
Predicting Leader Abusive Supervision*

Variable	Step 1			Step 2		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$
Primary Psychopathy	.45	.08	.47***	.39	.09	.41***
Fear or Power Loss	.02	.03	.07	.01	.03	.02
Leader Psychopathy x Fear of Power Loss	-	-	-	.08	.04	.16
$\Delta R^2$		.25			.02	
$R^2$		.24			.27	
$R^2_{adj}$		.24			.25	
<i>F</i> change		23.25***			3.05 (p=.08)	
<i>Df</i> (1,2)		(2,137)			(3,136)	

*Note.* *N* = 140 dyads (listwise).

\**p* < .05

\*\**p* < .01

\*\*\**p* < .001

**Table 3***Regression Analyses Table With Controls: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses**Predicting Leader Abusive Supervision*

Variable	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$
Primary Psychopathy (centered)	-	-	-	.33	.13	.34*	.31	.13	.32*
Fear or Power Loss (centered)	-	-	-	.02	.03	.06	.01	.03	.03
Leader Psychopathy x Fear of Power Loss	-	-	-	-	-	-	.05	.04	.12
Agentic Narcissism	.89	.22	.35****	.56	.25	.22*	.48	.25	.19
Machiavellianism	.10	.04	.22*	-.01	.05	-.02	-.01	.05	-.02
$\Delta R^2$		.24			.04			.01	
$R^2$		.24			.28			.29	
$R^2_{adj}$		.23			.26			.26	
<i>Fchange</i>		21.28 ****			4.15*			1.52	
<i>Df(1,2)</i>		(2,137)			(2,135)			(1,134)	

*Note.*  $N = 140$  dyads (listwise).\* $p < .05$ \*\* $p < .01$ \*\*\* $p < .001$