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When Do Abusive Leaders Experience Guilt?

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Purpose – Drawing from the appraisal theory, this paper examines the conditions under which abusive leaders experience guilt and suggests that guilt motivates leaders to help followers.

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Design/methodology/approach – A scenario study with a sample of 285 hospitality supervisors was used to test the theoretical model. Path analyses were conducted to test the three-way-moderated-mediation model.

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Findings - Results show a three-way interaction among enacted abuse, managerial abuse, and agreeableness on guilt: Leaders are more likely to experience guilt over their enacted abusive supervision when they do not perceive their direct manager as abusive and when they are agreeable. Moreover, guilt mediates the relationship between enacted abuse and a leader’s intention to help their followers.

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Research implications – This study shows that abusive supervisors pay an emotional cost for their enacted abuse (in terms of guilt).

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Practical implications – Hospitality organization should assign non-abusive mentors to leaders, especially agreeable ones, to detect and reduce abusive supervision.

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Originality/ value – First, this study addressed the lack of research on the effect of abusive supervision on the abusers by studying the conditions under which abusive leaders experience guilt. Second, this study shows that because of guilt, abusive leaders have a higher intention to help their followers. It explains why abusive leaders can be helpful.

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Keywords – Enacted abusive supervision, experienced guilt, managerial abusive supervision, agreeableness, appraisal theory

Introduction

Abusive supervision is pervasive in hospitality organizations (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008): Hight et al. (2019) found that active abusive supervision— managers “yell or become hostile during interactions with employees” (p. 101)— was common among “bad” hospitality managers. Although the hospitality industry ranks among the top five industries with abusive supervision (Namie, 2013), abusive supervision is ineffective (see Tepper et al., 2017, for a recent review). Working for an abusive leader harms hospitality employees’ service performance (Hon and Lu, 2016; Lyu, Zhu, et al., 2016; Lyu, Zhou, et al., 2016) and helping behaviors (Zhao and Guo, 2019). It also increases job dissatisfaction (Pan et al., 2018) and career turnover (Xu et al., 2018). Besides, hostile comments from supervisors can result in a lawsuit against hospitality organizations (EEOC, 2018). Given the importance of maintaining service quality and keeping talent in the hospitality industry, there is a pressing need to study abusive supervision in the hospitality industry with a focus to convince hospitality leaders not to enact abusive supervision.

Although existing literature demonstrated that followers (i.e., victims) would suffer from abusive supervision, much less is known about the consequences for the leaders who enacted abuse (i.e. abusers). This is surprising because leader-follower interaction is dyadic and reciprocal (Uhl-Bien, 2011), suggesting that ignoring the effect of abusive supervision on the leader may be biased and may underestimate the harmful effects of abusive supervision. It also impairs hospitality organizations’ ability to convince leaders not to enact abuse for their own self-interest, increasing the difficulties to stop abusive supervision in the hospitality industry. Specifically, since abusive supervision is morally wrong (Hannah et al., 2013) and even subtle incivility can impair perpetrator’s well-being (Foulek et al., 2018), it is surprising that research on the effect of severe supervisory hostility (i.e., enacted abuse) on leader’s moral emotions, such as

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guilt, is noticeably absent. As leaders' emotion is important to hospitality leaders' effectiveness (Haver et al., 2014), there is a need to understand when abusive leaders experience guilt.

Guilt is particularly relevant to abusive supervision because it is a self-assessed moral emotion in response to ones' interpersonal wrongdoings (Tangney et al., 2007). Guilt encourages wrongdoers to reflect their interpersonal mistreatment (Tangney and Dearing, 2002) and motivates them to seek forgiveness and make restitution (Goodstein et al., 2016). As such, guilt can make a valuable extension to the current literature on abusive supervision as it motivates helping behaviors that contradict with abuse (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1994; De Hooge et al., 2001). It resolves the long debate on why abusive leaders can transform into being helpful (Lian et al., 2012). Moreover, guilt is an interesting emotion that hospitality leadership has overlooked. Despite its usefulness in repairing interpersonal damages (Tangney and Dearing, 2002; Tangley et al., 2007), guilt is a painful emotion (Bastian et al., 2011) that adds emotional burden to hospitality leaders who are already overwhelmed by incivility (Cho et al., 2016) and role overload (Altinay et al., 2019). The study of guilt highlights the harmful effect of abusive supervision in the hospitality industry from a new perspective and sheds light on potential ways to reduce abusive supervision.

Drawing from appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991; Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015) and research on self-conscious emotions (Tracy et al., 2007), we examine when do leaders experience guilt, which motivates them to help their followers. Since the experience of guilt roots in personal moral standards and social norms (e.g., Bandura, 1990; Tangney et al., 2007), we further predict that the association between enacted abuse and guilt depends on whether the leaders perceive their manager as abusive and whether they are agreeable (see Figure 1).

-----Figure 1 here-----

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Because managers are tasked with performance appraisal and daily supervision of frontline leaders, managers have legitimate, rewards and conceive power over frontline leader (Yukl and Falbe, 1991). This power difference motivates frontline leaders to trust and learn from their direct managers (Willemyns et al., 2003). Studies have argued that having an abusive manager makes one see abusive supervision as socially acceptable (e.g., Hon and Lu, 2016; Liu et al., 2012). Since social norm impacts ones' moral judgment (Haidt, 2001), we propose that having an abusive manager weakens abusive leaders' guilt reaction.

However, not all leaders learn and accept managerial abuse (e.g., Liu et al., 2012; Mawritz et al., 2012; Tu et al., 2018), which makes it essential to examine individual's interpersonal-related personality as a potential boundary condition on the moderating effect of managerial abuse. Specifically, agreeableness, which has a key feature of communion striving (Barrick and Mount, 1991), is especially relevant to this study because of two reasons. First, being a big five personality factor, agreeableness is a fundamental building block of personality (Costa and McCrae, 1992). With a focus on dispositional tendency on interpersonal interactions (Graziano and Eisenberg, 1997), agreeableness has the strongest relationship with aggressive behaviors among all Big five personality (Barlett and Anderson, 2012). Second, hospitality researchers have consistently recommended hospitality employers to hire people who are agreeable (e.g., Barrash et al., 2007; Silva, 2006). As a result, hospitality leaders can be overwhelmingly agreeable, enhancing the importance of understanding the nature of agreeableness among hospitality leaders.

Agreeable leaders may have conflicting emotional reactions to their hostile behaviors. On the one hand, the warm nature makes agreeable leaders less likely to endorse abusive supervision (Camps et al., 2016; Eissa and Lester, 2017), suggesting that agreeable leaders who do not have

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an abusive manager may feel more guilt over their enacted abuse. On the other hand, with a desire to get along well with others, agreeable leaders are also more likely to conform to the social norms as set by others' behaviors (Shum et al., 2019; Kristjánsson, 2006). Therefore, agreeable leaders who have an abusive manager may see abusive supervision more socially acceptable (Taylor and Kluemper, 2012; Zhang and Bednall, 2016), reducing their guilt reaction over enacted abuse. Accordingly, we propose that the moderating effect of managerial abuse is stronger for agreeable leaders.

Based on the appraisal theory, we further propose that abusive leaders cope with their experienced guilt by helping their followers. The examination of helping as an indirect outcome of abusive supervision is interesting because of its conflicting nature. By showing guilt as a mediator between the relationship of abusive supervision and helping, we explain why abusive leaders can be supportive. It provides meaningful implications as to how we can use abusive leader's guilt to reduce future abusive supervision in the workplace.

Our study contributes to hospitality abusive supervision literature in three major ways. First, by shifting away from a focus on the effects of abusive supervision on followers (e.g., Lyu, Zhu et al., 2016) this study highlights another detrimental effect of abusive supervision from the leader's perspective (in term of guilt). Second, instead of focusing on trickle-down effects (e.g., Tu et al., 2018), we suggest that managerial abuse also alter the leader's emotional appraisal of their abusive behaviors. Additionally, we shed light on the potential dark side of agreeableness by positing that good-natured agreeable leaders may not always feel bad about hurting their followers when they have an abusive manager. Third, by testing the mediating role of guilt on the relationship between enacted abuse and a leader's intention to help followers, we suggest that these paradoxical leadership behaviors may stem from leaders' desire to cleanse their guilt

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(Zhong and Liljenquist, 2006). It explains the psychological mechanisms underlying abusive leaders' helping behaviors.

Theory and hypotheses

Appraisal theory, enacted abusive supervision, and guilt

Appraisal theory describes a two-stage process of emotions (Lazarus, 1991). In the primary appraisal, people form interpersonal emotions by appraising the event, the contexts, and personal relevancy. In particular, appraisal theory emphasizes that emotional reactions are stronger when one has control and responsibility for the situation (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015). In the secondary appraisal, people cope with their emotions to reduce unpleasant emotions (Lazarus, 1991).

Guilt is "a negative feeling about the adverse impact of one's actions on others" (Grant and Wrzesniewski, 2010, p. 110). In the primary appraisal, a person feels guilt when he/she believes his/her actions violate a relevant moral norm (Tangney et al., 2007). In the secondary appraisal, guilt is a strong motivator for wrongdoers to help the victims (Baumeister et al., 1994) because helping others allows people to cope with guilt and attain social goals, such as rebuilding communal relationships (Tracy et al., 2007).

For a person to experience guilt, two criteria need to be met: there is an interpersonal transgression and the actor is responsible for it (Tangney et al., 2007). Abusive supervision is a type of interpersonal wrongdoing because it impairs the well-being of followers and their families (see Tepper et al., 2017 for a review)—thus, the first criterion was qualified. Since leaders have the ultimate control over their enacted abuse (Tepper et al., 2017), they are responsible for their transgression, fulfilling the second criterion. Supportively, empirical evidence shows that aggression is related to guilt (Tangney et al., 1992). Since it is morally

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wrong to cause harm to others (Cushman et al., 2006) and leaders are responsible for the wrongdoings, enacting abusive triggers guilt.

Hypothesis 1. *Enacted abusive supervision is positively related to guilt.*

The moderating role of managerial abuse

While abusive supervision violates moral norms, each individual’s guilt reactions over enacted abuse depends on social norms because abusive supervision can be socially acceptable, especially when managers are abusive (e.g., Hon and Lu, 2016; Liu et al., 2012). Individuals observe others’ actions to understand the social norms and to justify their wrongdoing (Rothschild et al., 2012). Therefore, social norms shape individuals’ moral standards (Bandura, 1990; Haidt, 2001) and determine whether they should feel guilt for their actions (Tangney et al., 2007). Managers have position power (Yukl and Falbe, 1991). Thus, even if the manager is abusive, frontline leaders often see them as role-models representing the social norms (Tu et al., 2018).

Experiencing abuse shifts leaders’ internal moral standards to endorse hostility (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2012; Reitzel-Jaffe and Wolfe, 2001). By attributing the wrongdoing as common and socially acceptable (Mawritz et al., 2012), leaders may not see abusive supervision as a type of interpersonal wrongdoing. They feel less guilt over their transgression by attributing blame to others and minimizing their accountability of wrongdoing (Rothschild et al., 2012). In the case of enacted abuse, leaders who perceived their own manager as abusive can displace responsibility of their hostility to the manager. Thus, managerial abuse weakens the leader’s guilt reactions to enacted abuse.

On the other hand, leaders who do not have abusive managers face consistent moral and social norms that discourage workplace hostility, clarifying the sinful nature of abusive

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supervision. Without a scapegoat, they are personally responsible for the interpersonal mistreatment (Rothschild et al., 2012). As they appraise their enacted abuse through a high internal moral standard, they experience a high level of guilt over their enacted abuse. Indirectly supporting this notion, studies showed that abusive supervision undermined subordinate moral courage (Hannah et al., 2013), which is critical for maintaining moral standards (Bandura, 2002) and the experience of moral emotions such as guilt (Jennings et al., 2015). Formally,

Hypothesis 2. *Managerial abuse moderates the relationship between enacted abusive supervision and guilt, such that this positive relationship is weaker for leaders who perceive their managers as abusive than those who do not.*

Three-way interaction with agreeableness

Not everyone conforms to social norms (Bandura, 1990) – the reaction to managerial behaviors depends on ones' interpersonal dispositional tendency. Focusing on getting along well with others (Costa and McCrae, 1992), agreeable people are more likely to be influenced by others (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Shum et al., 2019). Even though agreeable leaders are less likely to enact abuse because of their kind and warm nature (Eissa and Lester, 2017; Foulk et al., 2018), agreeable people are not necessarily more moral (Dollinger and LaMartina, 1998). Because they tend to trust others and want harmony (Milam et al., 2009), “they follow socially accepted norms and practices” (Kristjánsson, 2006, p. 36). Thus, agreeable people can be unethical when they are under the wrong social influence (Shum et al., 2019).

Agreeable leaders, who are not abused by managers, are most likely to experience guilt after enacting abuse because of two reasons. First, their kind nature makes them less likely to endorse hostility (Eissa and Lester, 2017; Foulk et al., 2018), which increases their recognition of abusive supervision as a type of interpersonal wrongdoings. Second, their communion striving

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nature makes them more likely to conform to social norms. With low managerial abuse, agreeable leaders are held accountable for their enacted abuse such that they experience a high level of guilt.

However, a high level of managerial abuse implies that abusive supervision is socially acceptable (Mawritz et al., 2012). As agreeable leaders give managers the “benefit of the doubt and attribute ambiguous, uncivil behavior to the situation” (Milam et al., 2009, p. 65), they considered abusive supervision as “commonplace” and “inconsequential” (Colbert et al., 2004, p. 319). With managerial abuse signaling a hostile social norm, agreeable leaders may not see enacted abuse as a form of transgression and can deny responsibility for the enacted abuse. Thus, agreeable leaders who have an abusive manager are less likely to feel guilt.

In contrast, low agreeable leaders, who have lower needs to maintain positive relationships with others (Graziano and Eisenberg, 1997), are less concern about getting along well with managers. Accordingly, their guilt over enacted abuse depends solely on their appraisal of damages caused by enacted abuse and their responsibility for the abuse, making guilt reactions unrelated to the managerial abuse. In short, the moderating effect of managerial abuse is weaker when agreeableness is low.

Hypothesis 3. *There is a three-way interaction among agreeableness, managerial abuse, and enacted abuse on guilt such that the moderating role of managerial abuse on enacted abuse–guilt relationship is stronger when agreeableness is high than when agreeableness is low.*

Experienced guilt and helping intentions

According to appraisal theory, once people experience a negative emotion in the primary appraisal, they take action to eliminate it in the secondary appraisal (Lazaurs, 1991). Reflecting a

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bad self (Tangney and Dearing, 2002), guilt is unpleasant (Zhong and Liljenquist, 2006) and painful (Bastian et al., 2011). Guilt also increases perspective-taking (Tangney et al., 1992), giving abusers a chance to reevaluate their actions (Tangley and Dearing, 2002). To seek forgiveness and make restitution (Goodstein et al., 2016), leaders who experienced guilt are motivated to help the victims (Baumeister et al., 1994; De Hooze et al., 2001). Supportively, studies show that transgressors engage in compensatory behaviors for their victims (Cunningham et al., 1980; de Hooze et al., 2001).

Hypothesis 4. *Guilt is positively related to the intention to help followers.*

In sum, we draw from the appraisal theory and propose a two-stage process. In the primary appraisal, abusive leaders experience guilt over their enacted abuse because “they do something wrong”. In the secondary appraisal, they are motivated to help their followers to cope with guilt. This suggests an indirect relationship between enacted abuse and intention to help followers via guilt.

Hypothesis 5. *Guilt mediates the indirect relationship between enacted abuse and intention to help followers.*

Method

Participants and procedures

The data was collected online via Amazon Mturk in August 2019. To ensure participants select realistic responses to the scenario study, we used four screening questions to limit participants to hospitality supervisors. The screening questions were (1) “What is your current job?”; (2) “Please indicate the industry in which you are currently employed”; (3) “How many hours you work per week”; and (4) “How many subordinates do you have”. 616 supervisors/ managers/ directors/ executives in hotel/ hospitality/ restaurant/ tourism/ meeting and events

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industries who worked at least 15 hours per week and had at least 1 subordinate were eligible to participate in the study in exchange for \$1.74.

Considering the sensitive nature of abusive supervision, we provided information on study purpose and assured participants confidentiality at the beginning of the study. Once they consented, participants provided information on their demographics, mood, history of abuse, and agreeableness. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of the managerial abuse conditions (i.e., abuse vs. control). They read a scenario and played the role of a restaurant manager. They received four memos from their manager (director of food and beverage), which constituted the managerial abuse manipulation. Next, they rated the perceived managerial abuse and reported the extent to which they will enact abuse to the subordinates in the scenario. Finally, they rated the level of guilt and answer a follow-up scenario-based question that measures the intention to help followers.

Among the 616 hospitality supervisors, 389 agreed to participate. After excluding data with missing value, the final sample included 285 hospitality supervisors (46% response rate). Table 1 lists the sample characteristics: 44% of the participants were women; They had an average of 112 months of full-time working experience ($SD = 83.27$) and worked for an average of 56 hours per week ($SD = 31.70$). Most of them work in hotel/ lodging (53%) and food and beverage/ restaurant (27%).

-----Table 1 here-----

Measures

Agreeableness. We measured participant’s agreeableness by asking them how accurately each of the 10 International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) agreeableness items describe them (1 =

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Very inaccurate; 5 = Very accurate). A sample item states “make people feel at ease”.

Cronbach’s alpha was .80.

Managerial abuse manipulation. We manipulated managerial abuse through four memos participants received from their direct manager in the scenario (adapted from Mayer et al., 2012; Farh and Chen, 2014; Tu et al., 2018). In the abuse condition, the manager was hostile — he wrote in all capital letters, ridiculed the subordinates, called the subordinates “stupid”, and belittled the participant’s contributions and competence. In the control condition, the manager’s tone was mild and respectful. The contents and lengths in the two conditions were comparable (manipulation available upon request).

To verify managerial abuse manipulation’s effectiveness, we pre-tested the materials in a pilot study with 182 undergraduate students who were enrolled in a leadership class. Pilot participants read the managerial abuse manipulation and rated the manager’s behaviors using Tepper’s (2000) 15-item abusive supervision scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*; e.g., “ridiculed me”; $\alpha = .97$). Participants in the control condition ($M = 2.20$, $SD = .74$) found the manager less abusive than participants in the abuse condition ($M = 3.78$; $SD = .63$; $t = 11.79$, $p < .01$).

Managerial abuse (perception). Even when individuals are exposed to the same managerial abuse manipulation, they perceive abuse differentially (Brees et al., 2016). Therefore, we measured perceived managerial abuse by asking participants to indicate to what extent the managers in the scenario abused them with Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) active abusive supervision scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*). Examples include “ridicules me” and, “tells me I’m incompetent” ($\alpha = .92$).

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Enacted abuse. After the managerial abuse manipulation and measurement of perceived managerial abuse, participants were asked “How likely will you use the following behaviors towards your subordinates, Xiao, Maria, and Jeff?”, where Xiao, Maria, and Jeff were the name of the subordinates in the scenario. We adapted Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) 5-item active abusive supervision scale to reflect a self-rating nature of abusive supervision (e.g., “I will ridicule them”, “I will tell them they are incompetent”; 1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*; $\alpha = .96$).

Guilt. Participants were instructed to rethink about their interactions with the subordinates in the scenario. Then, they rated their state guilt using the 5-item scale developed by Marshall et al. (1994), including “I feel bad about something I have done.”, “I feel like apologizing, confessing”, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*; $\alpha = .94$).

Intention to help followers. Participants reported the amount of money (on a scale of \$0 to \$200) they would lend to one of their followers after reading a follow-up scenario (“On a Friday, you see Maria in the elevator. She looks frustrated and you asked her what's happened. She told you that she lost her wallet and she needs to buy her family dinner on the way home. She mentions that she has no alternative way to get help and asked if you can lend her some money for the day. She swears that she will repay the debt on the coming Monday.”). The scenario was developed based on a real-person experiment where participants lent money to victims (Cunningham et al., 1980).

Control variables. We conducted analyses with full-time working experience, gender, history of abuse, and mood as control variables. Participants reported their full-time working experience in years and months. It was controlled because participants with longer working

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experience can have a matured leadership identity (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), reducing the impact of managerial abuse, and guilt reactions over enacted abuse. We controlled for gender (1 = male; 0 = female) because men show more aggressive behaviors and less guilt (Roos et al., 2014). We controlled for participants' history of abuse because it changes one's likelihood to endorse and enact abusive supervision (Reitzel-Jaffe and Wolfe, 2001), which reduces the variance in enacted abuse and the moderating effect of managerial abuse. Participants were asked how often their friends, relatives, coworkers, classmates, and/ or supervisor intentionally undermined them with Duffy et al.'s (2002) 15-item scale (1 = *Never*; 5 = *Always*; e.g., "insulted you", $\alpha = .96$). Finally, we controlled for mood using a single item with five emotion icons (1 = *Sad*; 5 = *Happy*) because the general mood can be related to guilt (Macht and Dettmer, 2006).

Analytical strategy

We analyzed the model using path analysis in Mplus 7.3. Following Aiken and West's (1991) recommendation, we mean-centered the independent variables (enacted abuse, perceived abuse, and agreeableness) before creating the interaction terms. The path analysis estimated the effects on four outcomes simultaneously. First, to account for the trickle-down effect (e.g., Liu et al., 2012), we included a path from managerial abuse to enacted abuse. Second, to account for perception difference in managerial abuse (Brees et al., 2016), managerial abuse (perception) was regressed on managerial abuse manipulation. Third, we regressed guilt on enacted abuse, perceived managerial abuse, agreeableness, all of the two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction. To facilitate interpretation, we plotted the three-way interaction at conditional values (i.e., plus and minus 1 *SD* of the independent variables, Aiken and West, 1991). Fourth, we regressed intention to help followers on enacted abuse and guilt. We controlled for the effect of covariates on all four outcomes. To test the mediation effect, we used the Monte-Carlo

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parametric bootstrapping approach with 20,000 replications to construct the confidence intervals (CIs) of indirect effect (MacKinnon et al., 2007).

Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and intervariable correlations. Supporting the trickle-down effect (e.g., Tu et al., 2018), perceived managerial abuse is positively related to enacted abuse ($r = .52, p < .01$). Additionally, managerial abuse manipulation was positively related to perceived managerial abuse ($r = .40, p < .01$), supporting the effectiveness of the manipulation. Enacted abuse was positively related to guilt ($r = .89, p < .01$) and guilt was positively related to the intention to help followers ($r = .56, p < .01$). The results provide preliminary support to the hypotheses.

-----Table 2 here-----

Table 3 shows the path-analysis. Supporting Hypothesis 1, enacted abuse was positively related to guilt ($\beta = 0.54, p < .01$). It suggests that leaders experienced guilt over enacted abuse. However, Hypothesis 2 was not supported – the interaction term between enacted abuse and perceived abuse was not significant ($\beta = -0.04, ns$).

-----Table 3 here-----

The three-way interaction among enacted abuse, perceived abuse, and agreeableness was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.11, p < .05$). Figure 2 illustrates the interaction pattern. When agreeableness was high (i.e., right plot), the slope of the enacted abuse–guilt relationship was steeper when managerial abuse was low (i.e., dotted-line) than when it was high (i.e., straight-line) (slope differences = $.28, p < .05$). In short, perceived managerial abuse mitigates the relationship between enacted abuse and guilt when agreeableness was high. However, the slopes of the two lines were not different on the left plot (slope difference = $.07, ns$), suggesting that the

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managerial abuse's moderation effect was weaker when agreeableness was low. Moreover, we tested the simple effect of enacted abuse on guilt at plus and minus 1 *SD* of perceived managerial abuse and agreeableness. The positive relationship between enacted abuse and guilt was strongest when perceived abuse was low and agreeableness was high (simple slope = .85, $p < .01$). Thus, Hypothesis 3, which proposes that the moderating role of managerial abuse on enacted abuse–guilt relationship is stronger when agreeableness is high than when agreeableness is low, was supported.

-----Figure 2 here-----

Supporting Hypothesis 4, guilt was positively related to the intention to help followers ($\beta = 12.90, p < .01$). Hypothesis 5 suggests that experienced guilt mediates the relationship between enacted abuse and the intention to help followers. Supporting Hypothesis 5, the indirect effect via experienced guilt was 6.98 with a 95% CI of [1.91, 12.25]. Overall, there was a three-way moderated indirect effect of -1.37 with a 95% CI of [-3.28, -0.06], providing support to the theoretical model.

Discussion and Conclusions

Conclusions

Drawing upon appraisal theory (Lazaurs, 1991; Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015) and research on self-conscious emotions (Tracy et al., 2007), the present research showed that abusive leaders – especially those who are agreeable and do not perceive their manager as abusive – experience guilt, which motivated them to help their followers. The findings provide insights on emotional costs leaders pay for abusing their followers and what leaders do to correct their wrongdoings.

Theoretical implications

Research on the role of abusive supervision in hospitality is in its infancy. Although previous hospitality studies have examined the effect of abusive supervision on followers (e.g., Hon and Lu, 2016; Lyu, Zhou et al., 2016; Zhao and Guo, 2019), much less attention has been paid on the effect of abusive supervision on the leader. We show that abusive supervisors suffer from guilt after enacted abuse. It supplements existing research and provides an alternative reason to convince leaders not to enact abuse.

Our study showed that leaders are most likely to experience guilt when they do not perceive their managers as abusive and when they are agreeable. By highlighting the importance of social norms in shaping a leader’s emotional appraisal, we move beyond traditional research on trickle-down effect (e.g., Hon and Lu, 2016) and suggest that managerial abuse also shifts leader’s moral emotion appraisal. In line with the work of Shum et al. (2019), we identified a dark side of agreeableness: Being the victims of managerial abuse can make agreeable leaders go against their “warm and kind” nature and become “cold and hostile” without experiencing guilt.

This study also contributes to the abusive supervision literature by examining how abusive leaders cope with guilt by helping their followers. We suggest that a leader’s intention to help their followers may not be altruistic but can be self-interested. The results resolve the long debate about why leaders can be both abusive and supportive. Together with findings on moral licensing (Lin et al., 2016), we suggested that abusive leaders can get into a cycle of switching between being abusive and supportive. As leaders who are both supportive and abusive can cause damage to the followers (Lian et al., 2012), this study shows that existing literature may underestimate the harmful effect on the leaders (in term of the emotional burden caused by guilt) and that on the followers (in term of the switching cycle).

Practical implications

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Building on previous studies (Tu et al., 2018), our research purports that having an abusive manager may make leaders think that engaging in such behaviors are morally acceptable. Therefore, it is essential for organizations to monitor abusive supervision at all levels of the organizational hierarchy through climate surveys. Given the detrimental effect of abuse, hospitality organizations should remove abusive managers from managerial positions.

Our study showed that hospitality leaders may experience guilt after behaving abusively, which in turn motivates them to help followers. However, organizations should not rely on leaders for “self-correction”. Guilt is a temporal emotion (de Hooge et al., 2011). Leaders may become abusive again after helping the victims (Lin et al., 2016). Given being paradoxical hurts followers more than constant abuse (Lian et al., 2012), leaders’ post-abuse helping may cause more harm to followers. To avoid this one-off behavioral change, organizations should provide one-on-one counseling to abusive leaders. This can be done by assigning a non-abusive senior-leader mentor to each leader. Through monthly meetings and personal interactions, the mentor can monitor the leader’s emotions (e.g., guilt) and identify abusive behaviors. The mentor can make guilt-coping as a learning moment and permanently correct leaders’ abusive style.

Such mentorship is especially important for agreeable leaders, who are vulnerable to the managerial influence. Our study shows that being the victims of managerial abuse makes agreeable leaders feel less guilt over their enacted abuse. While we agreed with past studies that recommend hiring agreeable leaders as they are less likely to enact abuse (Eissa and Lester, 2017), we believe it is equally important to provide these agreeable leaders with good role-models through mentorship programs and peer-support groups so that they can be the warm and caring leaders as they should.

Limitations and future research

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The current research has some limitations. First, the relationship between experienced guilt and intention to help followers was correlational in nature and could not infer causality. It may also be prone to common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003) though this is less a concern for the three-way interaction (Siemsen et al., 2010). Second, we measured the intention to help followers using a single scenario-based item. Although lending money is a common way to measure helping in scenario study and guilt literature (Schmidt and Weiner, 1988), it only measured ones' intention to help but not actual behaviors. Third, since this is a one-time experiment, interactions between participants and their followers or the manager were limited. With limited interactions, participants may be less willing to offer help and are less influenced by managerial abuse. Although existing studies showed that scenario and field studies yield similar findings (e.g., Farh and Chen, 2014; Mayer et al., 2012), we may underestimate the moderating effect of managerial abuse and the effect of guilt on helping. Fourth, we relied on the participants' self-rating of enacted abuse. Due to social desirability, they may under-report their abusive tendency. It reduces the variance of enacted abuse and the power to detect significant findings. To address these limitations, we call for future research to replicate the study in an experiment where they manipulate managerial abuse, observe enacted abuse, and helping in a controlled environment (cf. Tu et al., 2018).

We encourage future research to further explore the role of emotions. One possibility is to study the spillover effects of guilt across domains such as investigating the effect of abusive supervision on the local community (e.g., charity donation) via the mediating role of guilt. Second, research can study the relationship between anticipated guilt and abusive supervision. Unlike experienced guilt, anticipated guilt is a feeling that people expect to have in the future

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(Baumeister et al., 2007), which may decrease interpersonal wrongdoing. Therefore, priming a leader's anticipated guilt can be an intervention to decrease abusive supervision.

Lastly, future research can study the effect of abusive supervision on other moral emotions, such as shame (Roos et al., 2014). While guilt and shame are both self-oriented negative emotions, guilt is more specific while shame relates to the entire self (Tangney et al., 2007). As shame is a more devastating, it trickles-down to followers' negative emotions: For example, shameful abusive leaders might avoid future interactions with the followers, resulting in guilt from themselves (for not fulfilling their duties as a leader) as well as followers' anger, retributive behaviors and guilt reactions.

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Figure 2. Theoretical model of enacted abuse and guilt

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Figure 2. Three-way interaction plot

Note. Slope difference are listed below:

Slope Low managerial abuse high agreeableness (right dotted) – Slope Low managerial abuse low agreeableness (left dotted) = .51, $p < .01$;
 Slope Low managerial abuse high agreeableness (right dotted) – Slope High managerial abuse low agreeableness (left straight) = .45, $p < .01$;
 Slope Low managerial abuse high agreeableness (right dotted) – Slope High managerial abuse high agreeableness (right straight) = .28, $p < .05$;
 Slope High managerial abuse high agreeableness (right straight) – Slope High managerial abuse low agreeableness (left straight) = .17, $p < .1$;
 Slope High managerial abuse high agreeableness (right straight) – Slope Low managerial abuse low agreeableness (left dotted) = .24, $p < .05$;
 Slope High managerial abuse low agreeableness (left straight) – Slope Low managerial abuse low agreeableness (left dotted) = .07, ns ;

Table 1. Sample characteristics

		N	Percentage
Gender	Male	161	56%
	Female	124	44%
Race	American Indian/Alaskan Native	6	2%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	25	9%
	Hispanic/ Latino	19	7%
	African American	60	21%
	Caucasian	184	65%
Full time working experience (<i>M</i> = 112 months, <i>SD</i> = 83.27)	12 months or less	1	0%
	13 months - 36 months	20	7%
	37 months - 60 months	20	7%
	61 months - 120 months	97	34%
	121 months - 240 months	57	20%
	More than 240 months	38	13%
Work hours (<i>M</i> = 56 hours, <i>SD</i> = 31.70)	Under 30 hours	1	0%
	41-60 hours	154	54%
	over 60 hours	46	16%
Job level	Supervisor	121	42%
	Manager	141	49%
	Director/ Executive	23	8%
Number of subordinates (<i>M</i> = 13 subordinates, <i>SD</i> = 7.72)	1-5 subordinates	57	20%
	6-10 subordinates	74	26%
	11-20 subordinates	104	36%
	Over 20 subordinates	50	18%
Hospitality industry segment	Hotel/ Lodging	150	53%
	Food and Beverage/ Restaurants	77	27%
	Gaming	5	2%
	Events/ Convention	16	6%
	Retails	21	7%
	Other	15	5%

N = 285 (listwise deletion)

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Table 2. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Enacted abuse	2.86	1.41	(.96)									
2. Managerial abuse (manipulation)	0.56	0.50	.05	(.92)								
3. Managerial abuse (Perception)	3.43	1.20	.52 **	.40 **								
4. Agreeableness	3.58	0.69	-.57 **	-.04	-.23 **	(.80)						
5. Guilt	3.02	1.26	.89 **	.04	.53 **	-.58 **	(.94)					
6. Intention to help followers	89.08	53.56	.53 **	.03	.33 **	-.31 **	.56 **					
7. Full time working experience	112.18	83.27	-.30 **	-.11 †	-.10	.19	-.25 **	-.09				
8. Gender	0.56	0.50	.12 *	.07	.01	-.25 **	.15 *	.09	-.05			
9. Mood	4.26	0.72	.28 **	-.10 †	.08	-.04	.23 **	.27 **	-.08	.00		
10. History of abuse	3.01	1.02	.73 **	.01	.51 **	-.44 **	.75 **	.54 **	-.16 **	.05	.22 **	(.96)

Note. $N = 285$ (listwise).

Managerial abuse manipulation was coded (0 = non-abuse condition, 1 = abuse); Gender was coded (0 = female, 1 = male).

 $^{\dagger} p < .1, ^{*} p < .05, ^{**} p < .01.$

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Table 3. Path analysis result

	Guilt		Intention to help followers	
Intercept	2.43	**	-39.49	†
Full time working experience	0.00		0.04	
Gender	0.08		3.26	
Mood	0.00		9.93	**
History of abuse	0.23	**	13.77	**
Enacted abuse ^a	0.54	**	1.47	
Managerial abuse (Perception) ^a	0.12	†		
Enacted abuse× Managerial abuse	-0.04			
Agreeableness ^a	-0.01			
Enacted abuse× Agreeableness	0.25	**		
Managerial abuse × Agreeableness	-0.34	**		
Enacted abuse× Managerial abuse × Agreeableness	-0.11	*		
Guilt			12.90	**
Residual variance	0.24	**	1812.08	**

Note. N = 285 (listwise) † $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

For simplicity, the path between managerial abuse (perception) and enacted abuse ($\beta = .38, p < .01$), as well as the path between managerial abuse manipulation and perceived managerial abuse ($\beta = .83, p < .01$) were not included in the table and are available upon request.

^a Variables were mean-centered