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When do employees help abused coworkers? It depends on their own experience with abusive supervision

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ABSTRACT

Past research has documented mixed findings about whether employees help abused co-workers: some studies found that employees are less likely to help abused co-workers, whereas others found the opposite. To explain these inconsistent findings, we consider the role of employee's own experiences with abusive supervision as a boundary condition. We propose competing hypotheses based on two frameworks. According to the altruistically motivated view of helping, employees help others because they empathize with others' negative situation. Thus, employees who have experienced abuse themselves would be better able to empathize with their abused co-workers, and thus help these co-workers more. By contrast, according to the egoistically motivated view of helping, employees help others because they want to reduce experienced negative emotions. Thus, employees who have experienced abuse themselves would feel less guilt and shame upon seeing their co-workers being abused, which in turn reduces their help towards abused co-workers as they do not need to relieve negative emotions (i.e., guilt and shame). Two experiments and a multi-wave, multi-source field study support the altruistically motivated view of helping. Our research advances the field's understanding of how organizations can prevent the spiral of destructive behaviour in the workplace.

Introduction

Abusive supervision is subordinates' experience of supervisor abuse, defined as "the extent to which supervisor behaviour is evaluated as abusive" (Fischer et al., 2021, p. 13). Most research on this topic has focused on either the victim's perspective or the perpetrator's perspective (e.g., Lam et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2016; Liao et al., 2018; Mawritz et al., 2014; Qin et al., 2018; Walter et al., 2015). However, an emerging body of research has recently adopted an observer's perspective, and has found that observing one's co-workers being abused by the supervisor (hereafter, *observed co-worker's abuse*) can motivate employees to engage in both destructive behaviours that are harmful to co-workers (Xu et al., 2020) and constructive behaviours intended to help co-workers (Chen et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2015; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019). A question then arises: When do employees demonstrate helping behaviours towards their abused co-workers, so that they can prevent a spiral of destructive work behaviour in the workplace?

Extant research has provided initial evidence about factors that can influence employees' helping responses towards abused co-workers. For example, employees who believe their co-workers deserve mistreatment are less likely to help their co-workers when their co-workers are abused by the supervisor (Mitchell et al., 2015). When co-workers are seen as their rivals, employees are also less likely to help them following abusive supervision (Chen et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020). However, employees are more likely to help their abused co-workers when they are in a work environment in which the fair and

ethical treatment of employees is emphasized (Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019). Although this line of work has advanced our understanding of when employees are more likely to help their abused co-workers, it has primarily focused on co-worker- and organization-related factors while overlooking employees' personal factors, such as whether employees are themselves being abused – as boundary conditions for employees' helping responses to co-workers' abuse.

Supervisors do not treat all their subordinates the same (Duffy et al., 2006; Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Liden & Graen, 1980). Therefore, it is possible that some employees working under a supervisor are targets of abusive supervision whereas others are not (Ogunfowora, 2013). As people give greater weight to their own experiences with injustice when interpreting the experiences of other (Kray & Lind, 2002; Lind et al., 1998), we decided to examine employees' helping responses to co-workers' abuse while considering the role of their own experiences with abuse (hereafter, *employee's own abuse*) for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, co-workers do not experience abusive supervision in a vacuum but in a rich social context in which others may or may not have also experienced abusive supervision (Farh & Chen, 2014; Priesemuth et al., 2014). Therefore, employees' own abuse creates a social context that can shape their helping reactions to their co-workers' abuse. Practically, research has revealed that the focal employees' coalition formation with co-workers can reduce supervisory abuse (Wee et al., 2017). Therefore, by examining whether employees with more or less experiences

with abuse are more willing to help abused co-workers, co-workers can resort to the right person for help so as to break the abusive supervision spiral.

Towards this end, the present research examines the impact of employee's own abuse on the relationship between observed co-worker's abuse and co-worker-directed help. Drawing on two different motivated views of helping (Batson et al., 1981, 1989; Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976; Cialdini et al., 1987), we propose competing predictions about the joint effect of observed co-worker's abuse and employee's own abuse on co-worker-directed help. Specifically, the altruistically motivated view of helping (Batson et al., 1981, 1989, 1991) leads to the prediction that employees who are themselves being abused would be *more* likely to help abused co-workers than employees who are themselves not being abused. When employees are themselves being abused, their shared mistreatment experiences will lead them to empathize with and affiliate with co-workers who are also being abused (cf. Kray & Lind, 2002); these feelings would in turn evoke the altruistic motivation of employees' help towards abused co-workers – leading employees to help abused co-workers to reduce their co-workers' distress. Therefore, employee's own abuse will strengthen the positive effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help via empathy and affiliation motivation.

In contrast, the egoistically motivated view of helping (Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976; Cialdini et al., 1987) leads to the prediction that employees who are themselves being abused would be *less* likely to help abused co-workers than employees who are themselves not being abused. When employees are themselves being abused, their shared mistreatment experiences make them feel less guilty and ashamed (cf. Spencer & Rupp, 2009). Employees are egoistically motivated to help others when they want to relieve experienced negative emotions (Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976; Cialdini et al., 1987). As employees who are themselves being abused experience fewer negative emotions (e.g., guilt and shame), they would help abused co-workers less. Therefore, employee's own abuse will

weaken the positive effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help via guilt and shame. Our theoretical model is depicted in Figure 1.

To test our model, we conducted three studies that employed different research designs (experiment study and multi-wave, multi-source field survey study) and collected samples from different cultures (the United States and China). In testing our theoretical model, our research makes several contributions to the literature. First, we extend extant research that has primarily focused on co-worker-related (e.g., rivalry and perceived goal competitiveness; Chen et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020) and organization-related factors (e.g., organizational justice; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019) as boundary conditions for employees' helping responses to co-workers' abuse, by focusing on employees' personal factor – employee's own abuse. In doing so, our research answers the call from researchers to consider the role of employees' own experiences with abuse when examining their reactions to co-workers' abuse (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Second, our research sheds light on the competing theoretical predictions regarding employees' motivation to help abused co-workers. Specifically, to reconcile whether employees' motivation to help abused co-workers is altruistic or egoistic, we introduce employee's own abuse as an inference test factor (i.e., a factor for a systematic test of hypotheses that pit conflicting theoretical predictions against one another; Platt, 1964). By doing so, we bring a fresh perspective to the study of employees' helping responses to co-workers' abuse. Abusive supervision is related to workplace bullying, which is defined as "a set of dysfunctional workplace behaviours ranging from those that adversely impact emotional well-being and stability to physical violence causing injury and harm" (Timo et al., 2004, p. 38). Just as researchers have been examining employees' reactions to their co-workers being abused, researchers have also started examining employees' responses to their co-workers' being bullied (e.g., D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Ng et al., 2020; Niven et al., 2020; Paull et al., 2012). However, this work has not taken the bystanders' own bullying experience into
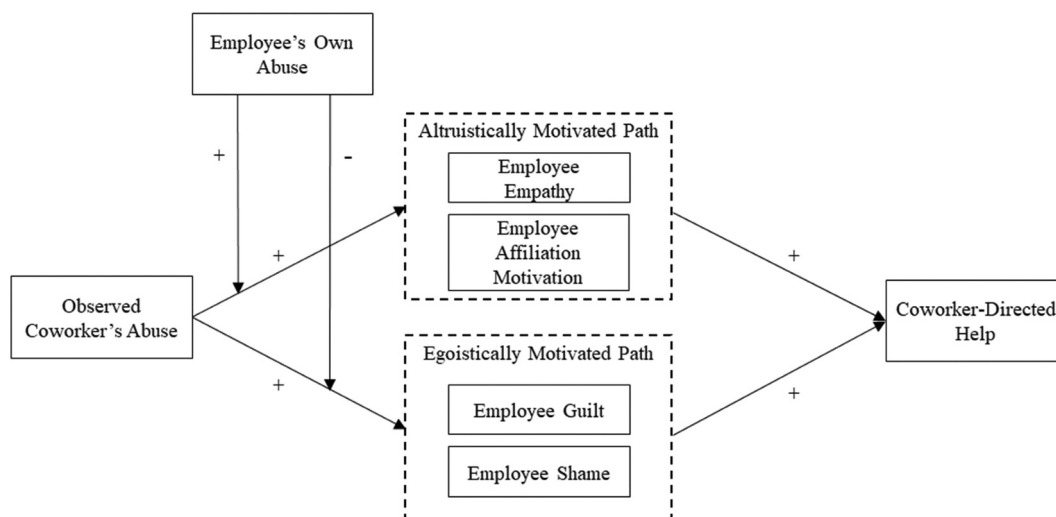

Figure 1. Theoretical model.

consideration. The logic underlying our prediction also applies to workplace bullying. Our research thus contributes to the bullying bystander literature by highlighting the possible role of bystander employees' own bullying experience when examining their responses to co-workers' experienced bullying.

Finally, our research contributes to the literature on counter-productive work behaviour (CWB) prevention. Extending prior research which has shown that witnessing co-worker abuse triggers employees' anger and schadenfreude, which in turn led to less helping and more CWB towards co-workers (Mitchell et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2020), our research shows that employees' shared mistreatment experiences with abused co-workers will lead them to empathize with and affiliate with co-workers and in turn increase their helping behaviours towards co-workers. Therefore, our research advances our understanding of how to prevent the spiral of destructive work behaviour in the workplace.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Observed coworker's abuse and coworker-directed help

Extant research has documented equivocal findings about whether employees help vs. withhold help towards their co-workers who are being mistreated. For example, employees are less willing to help co-workers who are bullied when they think that their co-workers are responsible for the bullying situation (Mulder et al., 2010; Ng et al., 2020). However, when bullied co-workers have more power than bystander employees, this power differential will instil fear in bystander employees, who are thus more willing to help their bullied co-workers (Mulder et al., 2008). Bystander employees are also more likely to help bullied co-workers if they feel sympathy towards their bullied co-workers (Omari, 2007; Paull et al., 2012).

In the context of abusive supervision, it is also ambiguous about whether employees provide help towards their abused co-workers. For instance, when employees perceive that their co-workers' goals compete with theirs, employees provide less help to these co-workers when they are being abused by the supervisor (Chen et al., 2021). Similarly, when seeing their co-workers as rivals, employees tend to withhold help towards these co-workers when they become victims of supervisory abuse (Xu et al., 2020). In contrast, another line of research demonstrates opposite findings. Specifically, research has revealed that employees are more willing to help their abused co-workers when they are in a work context in which fairness norms and values are emphasized (Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that whether employees help vs. withhold help towards their abused co-workers depends on boundary factors.

The moderating role of employee's own abuse

Departing from extant research which has primarily focused on co-worker- and organization-related boundary factors, we shift our attention to employees' own personal factors. Specifically, we examine employee's own abuse as a boundary factor that influences the effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help. As supervisors tend to mistreat subordinates in the same team to different extents (Farh & Chen, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2015; Schaubroeck et al., 2016), employees observing their co-workers being abused might also experience varying levels of supervisory abuse themselves. Research posits that supervisors' differentiated mistreatment can provide individual employees with information that contributes to their appraisals of their own and others' mistreatment. For example, employees who were abused by a supervisor had a lower-quality exchange relationship with their supervisor and exhibited less trust in their co-workers if their co-workers were not abused (Peng et al., 2014). Employees who were victims of abusive supervision experienced more anger when their co-workers were also abused (Peng et al., 2019). This work therefore suggests that when employees observe their co-workers being abused, they may use this information to make sense of their own mistreatment by the supervisor.

Applying this logic to our case, we posit that employees who observe their co-workers being mistreated may also use information about their own mistreatment to appraise co-workers' mistreatment. Indeed, prior research has suggested that people's reactions to others' mistreatment or injustice are influenced by their own experiences of mistreatment and injustice (e.g., Colquitt, 2004; De Cremer & Van Hiel, 2010; Duffy et al., 2006; Kray & Lind, 2002; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004; Spencer & Rupp, 2009; Van Proojien et al., 2012). For example, Kray and Lind (2002) found that third-party observers' reactions to their co-workers' injustice experience depended on their own injustice experience. Specifically, compared to observers who experienced low-level injustice, observers who experienced high-level injustice themselves harboured greater empathy for their co-workers who also experienced injustice. Building on this evidence, we expect employees' own abuse would interact with observed co-workers' abuse in predicting their help towards co-workers. As the altruistically and egoistically motivated views of helping provide competing predictions for this interaction effect, in the following we discuss both the strengthening and weakening effects of employees' own abuse on the relationship between observed co-workers' abuse and co-worker-directed help.

Accentuating effect of employees' own abuse: the altruistically motivated view of helping

Batson and colleagues' (Batson et al., 1981, 1989, 1991) altruistically motivated view of helping posits that people help others because of their desire to reduce others' distress or increase others' welfare. Although people may obtain some benefits from helping others, "personal gain must be an unintended by-product and not the goal of the behaviour" (Batson et al., 1981, p. 291). According to this view, employees help abused co-workers because they feel empathy for their co-workers' plight and want to increase their co-workers' welfare.

Drawing on the altruistically motivated view of helping, we predict that employees who are themselves being abused would be more likely to help abused co-workers. When employees are themselves being abused, they might feel more empathy towards co-workers who are also being abused. This is because if both employees and their co-workers are

being abused, then the common mistreatment experience will elicit employees' empathy, which refers to "an other-oriented emotional response congruent with the perceived welfare of another person" (Batson et al., 1988, p. 52). Providing support for this argument, research has found that people who share experiences with others tend to value the others' welfare; when they perceive that others' welfare is being threatened, they are more likely to experience compassion and sympathy (Batson et al., 1995). Extending these findings to our context leads to the prediction that when observing co-workers being abused, employees are more likely to experience empathy if they are being abused themselves (which leads to a shared experience). As empathic concern for others increases people's altruistic motivation to help others (Batson et al., 1981, 1991), we expect that abused employees who feel empathy for their abused co-workers would be more likely to help their co-workers.

The shared experience of being abused is also likely to increase employees' motivation to affiliate with their abused co-workers, and in turn, to help their abused co-workers. Shared experiences activate members' group identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000), and lead people to like, trust, and favour other members of their group (cf. Brewer, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This increased liking and favourability increases people's tendency to affiliate with their group members, which in turn motivates them to engage in actions to reduce group members' suffering (cf. Hill, 1987; Van Kleef et al., 2008). Extending these findings to the abusive supervision context, we predict that employees who are abused would be motivated to affiliate with their co-workers who are also being abused due to their shared mistreatment experience. When people's affiliation motivation is high, they tend to emphasize their relationship with others and value others' welfare (Batson et al., 1995). Thus, we further propose that if abused employees are motivated to affiliate with their co-workers who are also being abused, then they would more likely help abused co-workers to increase co-workers' welfare. Taken together, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Employee's own abuse will strengthen the positive relationship between observed co-worker's abuse and co-worker-directed help.

Hypothesis 2: The interaction between observed co-worker's abuse and employee's own abuse on co-worker-directed help will be mediated by empathy (Hypothesis 2a) and affiliation motivation (Hypothesis 2b).

Attenuating effect of employees' own abuse: the egoistically motivated view of helping

The egoistically motivated view of helping suggests that people's motivation to help is driven by their desire to gain personal benefits (e.g., increased self-esteem or self-satisfaction) or to avoid personal pain (e.g., negative mood; Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976; Cialdini et al., 1987). Thus, the idea is that the ultimate goal of helping is to increase the helper's own welfare (Cialdini et al., 1987). According to this view, employees help abused co-

workers because they want to alleviate their own negative feelings, such as guilt and shame, which are induced by witnessing co-workers being abused (cf. Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976).

This theory leads to the prediction that employees who are themselves being abused would be less likely to help abused co-workers. When employees are abused themselves, they are less likely to experience negative emotions, such as guilt and shame, upon seeing their co-workers being abused. This is because when employees see that their co-workers are receiving the same mistreatment that they are receiving, this shared mistreatment leads to the experience of a co-victim (Glomb et al., 1997; Lim et al., 2008). Therefore, employees who are themselves being abused are less likely to feel that they are a survivor who has been exempted from leader abuse (cf. Brockner et al., 1985), and thus experience fewer feelings of guilt and shame (Baumeister et al., 1994). When people are exposed to experiences that lead to fewer negative emotions (e.g., guilt and shame), they will not engage in helping behaviours as they do not need to relieve negative emotions (Cialdini & Kenrick, 1976; Cialdini et al., 1973). Thus, we propose that employees who are abused themselves will be less likely to help their co-workers who are being abused due to lower feelings of guilt and shame. Providing indirect support for our argument, research has found that compared to employees spared from being laid off, those who were laid off themselves experienced fewer feelings of guilt when their co-workers were also laid off. Due to lower feelings of guilt, employees who were laid off were less motivated to increase their work output in order to reduce their experienced negative feelings (Brockner et al., 1985). Based on these arguments, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3: Employee's own abuse will weaken the positive relationship between observed co-worker's abuse and co-worker-directed help.

Hypothesis 4: The interaction between observed co-worker's abuse and employee's own abuse on co-worker-directed help will be mediated by guilt (Hypothesis 4a) and shame (Hypothesis 4b).

Overview of studies

We conducted three studies to test our theoretical model. In Study 1, we provided a preliminary test of Hypotheses 1 and 3 by conducting an experimental study using a US sample. In Study 2, we replicated the results of Study 1 by conducting a field study in China. In doing so, we not only provide evidence for the external validity of our findings, but also verify that our findings are not culture specific. In Study 3, we tested the full theoretical model using the same experimental design as used in Study 1. Taken together, these three studies employ mixed research designs (i.e., experiment study and field study) and samples (i.e., from the US and China) to provide converging evidence for the internal and external validity of our conclusions.

Our study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university to which the authors were affiliated when the study was conducted, including protocols IRB-2017-05-038, titled "Influence of Social Motivations on Cultural Learning, Adjustment and Integration," and IRB-2015-07-018, titled "Role of Implicit Processes in Cultural Learning." In all studies, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they can refuse to participate or discontinue their participation at any time without penalty or loss of the benefits to which they were otherwise entitled. Participants were also told that their responses would be kept confidential and only researchers of this project can get access to their responses. Participants were paid for their participation in our study (Study 1: $0.5 per person; Study 2: 20 RMB per person; Study 3: $1 per person).

Study 1

Study 1 aims to test whether employee's own abuse will strengthen or weaken the effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help. Specifically, we conducted a 2 (observed co-worker's abuse: high versus low) × 2 (own abuse: high versus low) between-participant experiment to examine how employees' own abuse influences whether they are more or less likely to help co-workers being abused.

Method

Participants

To err on the side of being conservative, we assumed a small effect size of Cohen's $f = .10$ (equivalent to partial $\eta^2 = .01$). A power analysis with $f = .10$, $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed), and power = 80% indicated that we need to recruit 787 participants. Rounding this number up, we posted a survey seeking 800 U.S. residents on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). In response, 960 participants started taking our surveys. After excluding participants who did not finish our survey, we obtained a final sample of 932 participants ($M_{age} = 38.17$ years, $SD_{age} = 11.95$, 93 missing values; 416 women, 430 men, 1 other, 85 missing values).

MTurk is a suitable source of participant samples because participants recruited from this platform are more diverse in their demographics (e.g., age, race, and countries) than traditional convenience samples; moreover, researchers typically get similar results from MTurk samples as from other traditional samples, including convenience student and employee samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Yuan et al., 2018). A meta-analytical study found that conventional data collection sources and online panels such as MTurk are of comparable quality (Walter et al., 2016). To ensure the quality of our sample, we also set up several prerequisites (e.g., requiring participants to possess a minimum of 97% approval rate, automatically excluding participants whose IP addresses were outside the USA, and stopping participants with identical MTurk IDs from taking our survey) when collecting data.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four scenarios (adapted from Farh & Chen, 2014). Participants were asked to imagine they were members of a research and development team with a total of four team members, including one team leader and three subordinates (i.e., the participant and two co-workers). Participants were told that the team was struggling to meet the deadlines set by the team leader for launching new products and that the team's progress was a bit slow.

In each scenario, participants were presented with a set of four emails sent to them by their team leader and their co-workers. The email messages contained our manipulation of high versus low observed co-worker's abuse, and high versus low employee's own abuse. The complete contents of the manipulations are shown in the Supplementary Materials document. After reading the scenario, participants completed the measure of co-worker-directed help and manipulation checks.

Manipulating observed co-worker's abuse

The manipulation of observed co-worker's abuse contained a single e-email message from the team leader sent to the entire team, and two additional email messages sent by and addressed to team members only (i.e., team leader was not included). In the *high observed co-worker's abuse* condition, the team leader attributed current challenges in meeting deadlines to the team's failures and publicly ridiculed the participant's two co-workers. Following the team leader's email message, participants also received two emails from their co-workers, who complained about how difficult the team leader was to work with and narrated abusive experiences with the team leader. The team leader's and two co-workers' emails collectively illustrated a situation in which the participant (i.e., the focal employee) both observed the team leader's abusive behaviours towards the two co-workers in the group email, and heard about the individualized abuse experienced by two co-workers.

In the *low observed co-worker's abuse* condition, the team leader attributed existing challenges in meeting deadlines to some mistakes made by the team early on in the process, but noted that mistakes happens all the time and that challenges are a part of the learning process. In the email, the team leader also encouraged the team to stay focused and committed to figuring out how to get their work done, as well as appreciated the input of the participant's two co-workers. Participants were then presented with two emails from their co-workers, who shared their enjoyable experiences working with the team leader. The three emails jointly painted a situation where the participant (i.e., the focal employee) both observed the team leader interacting with two co-workers in a neutral tone and heard about the neutral but respectful treatment two co-workers received from the team leader.

Manipulating employee's own abuse

Participants (i.e., focal employees) received a personalized email message from the team leader. In the *high employee's own abuse* condition, the team leader acknowledged the difficulties encountered by the team in meeting deadlines, and expressed negative and belittling comments on the focal employee's contributions and competence. In the *low employee's own abuse* condition, the team leader acknowledged the team's slow progress in meeting deadlines. However, instead of launching a personal attack, the team leader addressed the focal employee in a neutral, respectful tone.

Coworker-directed help

We assessed employees' desires to help their co-workers using the three-item shortened version of the scale developed by Williams and Anderson (1991) (e.g., "I would go out of way to help Casey and Riley"). Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" (α = .93).

Manipulation check

To measure employee's own abuse, participants were administered the Mitchell and Ambrose's (2007) five-item version of Tepper's (2000) abusive supervision measure (e.g., "J.P. ridicules me"). Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (α = .95). To measure observed co-worker's abuse, we employed a referent-shift adaptation of the items. Participants were asked to respond to items, such as "J.P. tells Casey and Riley that their thoughts or feelings are stupid", on a 7-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (α = .99).

Data analysis

Before testing our hypotheses, we first examined whether our manipulation was successful. The results showed that participants in the *high observed co-worker's abuse* condition (M = 5.95, SD = 1.53) rated team leaders' abusive behaviours towards co-workers higher than those in the *low observed co-worker's abuse* condition (M = 1.72, SD = 1.36; t(930) = 44.65, p < .001;

Cohen's d = 2.93). Further, participants in the *high employee's own abuse* condition (M = 5.23, SD = 1.46) rated team leaders' abusive behaviours towards themselves higher than those in the *low employee's own abuse* condition (M = 1.97, SD = 1.42; t(930) = 34.69, p < .001; Cohen's d = 2.28). These results therefore indicate that our experimental manipulations were successful. We then conducted 2 × 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) analyses to test our hypotheses.

Results

The descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of the variables included in this study are displayed in Table 1.

We conducted a 2 (observed co-worker's abuse: high versus low) × 2 (employee's own abuse: high versus low) ANOVA on co-worker-directed helping behaviour to test our competing hypotheses––Hypotheses 1 and 3. We found a significant two-way interaction ($F(1, 928) = 46.04$, p < .001, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). As illustrated in Figure 2, simple effect analyses indicated that in the *low observed co-worker's abuse* condition, participants in the *low employee's own abuse* condition (M = 4.83, SD = 1.39) reported greater co-worker-directed help than those in the *high employee's own abuse* condition (M = 3.94, SD = 1.61; p < .001; Cohen's d = 0.60). However, in the *high observed co-worker's abuse* condition, participants in the *high employee's own abuse* condition (M = 5.38, SD = 1.27) reported greater co-worker-directed help than those in the *low employee's own*

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, Reliability, and correlations among variables (Study 1).

Variables	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1. Observed co-worker's abuse[a]	.51	.50	−.03	−2.00			
2. Own abuse[b]	.50	.50	.00	−2.00	.02		
3. Coworker-directed help	4.80	1.52	−.47	−.49	.26***	−.08*	(.93)

Notes. N = 932. Pairwise deletion is used. Reliability estimates (Cronbach alpha coefficients) are presented along the diagonal in parentheses.
[a]Observed co-worker's abuse: 0 = low observed co-worker's abuse condition; 1 = high observed co-worker's abuse condition.
[b]Own abuse: 0 = low own abuse condition; 1 = high own abuse condition.
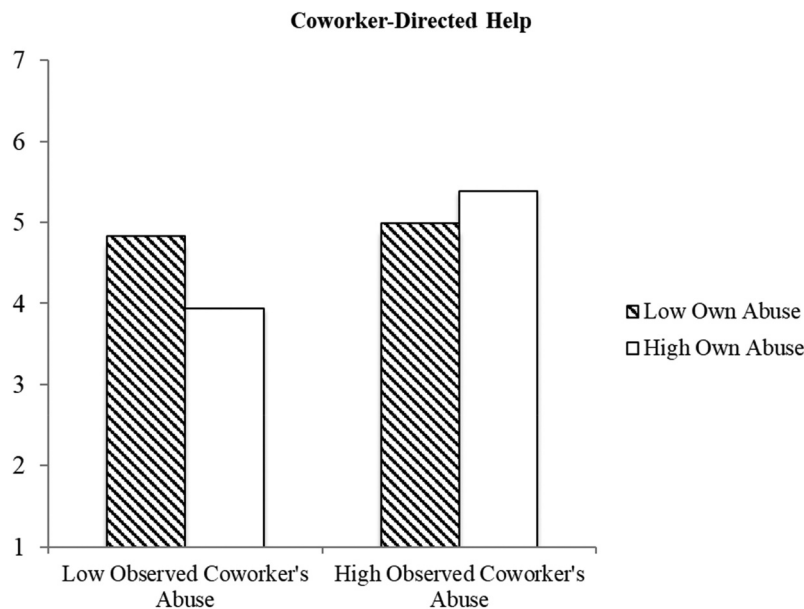*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 2. Interactive effect of observed co-worker's abuse and employee's own abuse on co-worker-directed help (Study 1).

abuse condition ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.45$; $p < .05$; Cohen's $d = 0.28$). This combination of findings provides support for Hypothesis 1, that high employee's own abuse strengthens the relationship between observed co-worker's abuse and co-worker-directed help, but not for Hypothesis 3.

Discussion

Using an experiment whereby we manipulated observed co-worker's abuse and employee's own abuse, Study 1 provided preliminary support for the altruistically motivated view of helping. Specifically, we found that employees helped their abused co-workers more when they themselves were also abused by the supervisor.

Study 2

Study 1 is limited in two respects. First, although experimental design can provide strong evidence for the internal validity of our findings, it is limited in external validity. That is, the results found in a scenario may not be generalizable to the real-life workplace situation. Therefore, it would be beneficial to examine how employees respond to co-workers' abuse in a field setting. Second, while our theoretical arguments are not culture specific, we used a US sample in Study 1. Given that people in low power distance cultures like the US are more likely to believe that abusive supervision is less justifiable and acceptable (Hofstede, 1980; Lian et al., 2012; Tyler et al., 2000), the observed effect in Study 1 may be less strong in high power distance cultures like China where people are inclined to believe that abusive supervision is more acceptable. To address these limitations, we conducted a field study to replicate the findings of Study 1 using a sample of Chinese employees.

Method

Participants
We collected data by inviting 138 full-time employees and their supervisors from 16 organizations in China. Participants worked in diverse industries including electronics, manufacturing, finance, chemicals, and construction. By recruiting participants from a variety of industries, we can enhance the external validity of our findings and avoid the contextual constraints associated with limited industries (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). In our invitation letter to participants, we provided a general overview of our research purpose, emphasized voluntary participation, and described the multi-wave, multi-source data collection process.

To minimize common method variance bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we collected data in two waves, separated by approximately a three-month interval. At Time 1, we sent online questionnaires to 138 employees. They provided ratings of observed co-worker's abuse and own abuse, and also reported their demographics. We received 130 responses, yielding a response rate of 94%. At Time 2, about three months after Time 1, we sent online questionnaires to 28 supervisors who directly supervise those 130 employees. Supervisors provided ratings of employees' helping behaviours towards co-workers and also reported their demographic information. We finally

received responses from 26 supervisors, yielding a response rate of 93%. To improve the response rates during this two-wave survey process, a research assistant reminded all participants to complete questionnaires on time.

Among these 130 employees (5 employees declined to report their demographics), 57% were men and 47% held a bachelor's degree or above. Their age distribution are as follows: 62% were 30 years old or below, 25% were between 31 to 35 years old, and 13% were 36 years old or above. Their average team tenure was 3.43 years ($SD = 5.14$). Among 26 supervisors (1 supervisor declined to report his/her demographics), 72% were men and 68% held a bachelor's degree or above. Their age distribution was: 12% were 30 years old or below, 68% were between 31 to 35 years old, and 20% were 36 years old or above. Their average team tenure was 5 years ($SD = 4.07$).

Measures
All survey instruments that were originally in English were translated into Chinese following the back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1986). Unless otherwise noted, all items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1 (strongly disagree)" to "7 (strongly agree)".

Observed co-worker's abuse (Time 1). We measured observed co-worker's abuse using the same five-item abusive supervision scale used in Study 1 (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Employees were asked to rate their observed co-workers' abuse by responding to sample items, such as "My supervisor puts my co-workers down in front of others" ($\alpha = .90$).

Employee's own abuse (Time 1). To assess employee's own abuse, we employed the same five-item abusive supervision scale (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Employees were asked to respond to items such as "My supervisor ridicules me" ($\alpha = .94$).

Co-worker-directed help (Time 2). We measured employees' helping behaviours towards their co-workers using the seven-item scale developed by Williams and Anderson (1991). We asked the supervisor to rate the extent to which a certain employee would help his/her co-workers. Supervisors replied to items such as "This employee would go out of way to help his/her co-workers" ($\alpha = .94$).

Control variables. Given the correlational design of our study, we controlled for several relevant factors to conduct a conservative test of our hypotheses and also to rule out alternative explanations for our results. Because research showed that employee demographics such as age and tenure are often related to helping behaviour (Chattopadhyay, 1999; Klotz et al., 2018; Ng & Feldman, 2008, 2011; Organ & Ryan, 1995; Zacher et al., 2010), we controlled for employee age and employee team tenure in our model.

Data analysis
Prior to examining the proposed structural model, the adequacy of the corresponding measurement model was tested via a confirmatory factorial approach (Bollen, 1989). We

conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to confirm the hypothesized three-factor structure of observed co-worker's abuse, own abuse, and co-worker-directed help. As CFAs are highly sensitive to sample size (MacCallum et al., 1999), statisticians have advocated the use of item parcelling when sample size is small because it influences the item to subject ratio, such that lower ratios may result in instability of the factor solution (Little et al., 2002; Marsh & Hocevar, 1988). Our item to subject ratio of 1:7.65 is lower than the recommended values (i.e., 1:10; Garson, 2008; Kunce et al., 1975; Marascuilo & Levin, 1983). Therefore, parcelling is a preferred method in our situation. Following the item-to-construct balance approach (Little et al., 2002), we created three parcels of items as indicators for observed co-worker's abuse and own abuse and four parcels of items as indicators for co-worker-directed help; we did so by averaging the two highest loading items with the two lowest loading items. All CFAs were conducted using LISREL 8.7.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted structural equation modelling (SEM) analyses using Mplus 8.4 (Muthén,). As our data has a nested nature (i.e., a supervisor provided ratings for multiple employees who directly reported to him/her; average number of employees per supervisor = 5), there was possibility that clustering would result in nonindependence of our data (Bliese, 2000). To examine this possibility, we ran a null model for co-worker-directed help. We found that there was substantial between-group variance in co-worker-directed help ($\chi^2_{(24)}$ = 319.52, p < .001; ICC(1) = .73), demonstrating noninde-pendence for co-worker-directed help ratings. Therefore, we conducted SEM analyses using the Huber – White sandwich estimator of variance using Mplus to correct for this issue (Huber, 1967; White, 1982). In addition, as some variables did not follow the normal distribution, we used robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimates (Maydeu-Olivares, 2017).

Results

The descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of the variables included in this study are displayed in Table 2.

Our measurement model resulted in a good fit. Specifically, the results of CFAs reveal that the hypothesized three-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2_{(27)}$ = 55.45, p < .01; CFI = .98, IFI = .98, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .04) and significantly better than two other alternative models: (a) a two-factor model combining observed co-worker's abuse and own abuse ($\triangle\chi^2_{(2)}$ = 35.82, p < .001; CFI = .96, IFI = .96, RMSEA = .13, SRMR = .05), and (b)

a single-factor model ($\triangle\chi^2_{(3)}$ = 133.09, p < .001; CFI = .85, IFI = .85, RMSEA = .20, SRMR = .21). These results therefore provide support for the discriminant validity of our variables and show the adequacy of our measurement model.

Hypotheses 1 and 3 proposed competing hypotheses as to whether employee's own abuse strengthens or weakens the effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help. We first tested our model without adding the interaction (−2Loglikelihood = −2745.499, number of free parameters = 56; Akaike (AIC) = 5602.997; Bayesian (BIC) = 5761.383). Then, we tested our model by adding the interaction (−2Loglikelihood = −2742.164, number of free parameters = 57; Akaike (AIC) = 5598.328; Bayesian (BIC) = 5759.542). The results showed that the interaction of observed co-worker's abuse and own abuse on co-worker-directed help was significant (B = .39, p = .019). Following Aiken et al. (1991), we plotted this significant interaction effect and conducted simple slope tests to further interpret it. Figure 3 reveals that when own abuse was high (one standard deviation above the mean), observed co-worker's abuse was positively related to co-worker-directed help (B = 1.06, p = .058); by contrast, when own abuse was low (one standard deviation below the mean), observed co-worker's abuse was not significantly related to co-worker-directed help (B = .13, p = .630). These results suggest that employee's own abuse strengthens the positive effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help, therefore providing support for Hypothesis 1 but not for Hypothesis 3.

Discussion

Using a field study which collected a sample of Chinese employees, Study 2 replicated Study 1's findings by showing that employees helped their abused co-workers more when they themselves were also abused by the supervisor. These results therefore provide support for the altruistically motivated view of helping, and also provide support for the generalizability of our findings across both the western and eastern cultures.

Study 3

In Study 3, we extend the findings of Studies 1 and 2 by directly measuring and testing the underlying mechanisms of altruistically versus egoistically motivated view of helping. Furthermore, an additional goal of Study 3 was to control for factors that influence employees' helping behaviours towards abused co-workers. We employed the same experimental design as used in Study 1. We manipulated both observed co-

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, Reliability, and correlations among variables (Study 2).

Variables	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age[a]	2.39	1.24	1.40	2.67					
2. Team tenure	3.43	5.14	3.73	17.86	.42***				
3. Observed co-worker's abuse	2.31	1.30	.87	.03	−.12	.05	(.90)		
4. Own abuse	1.97	1.19	1.13	.28	−.12	.15[†]	.75***	(.94)	
5. Coworker-directed help	5.55	1.17	−.78	.34	−.06	−.26**	−.26**	−.24**	(.94)

Notes. N = 116–128. Pairwise deletion is used. Reliability estimates (Cronbach alpha coefficients) are presented along the diagonal in parentheses.
[a]Age is a categorical variable: 1 = 25 years old or below; 2 = 26–30 years old; 3 = 31–35 years old; 4 = 36–40 years old; 5 = 41–45 years old; 6 = 46–50 years old; 7 = 51–55 years old; 8 = 56–60 years old; 9 = 61 years old or above.
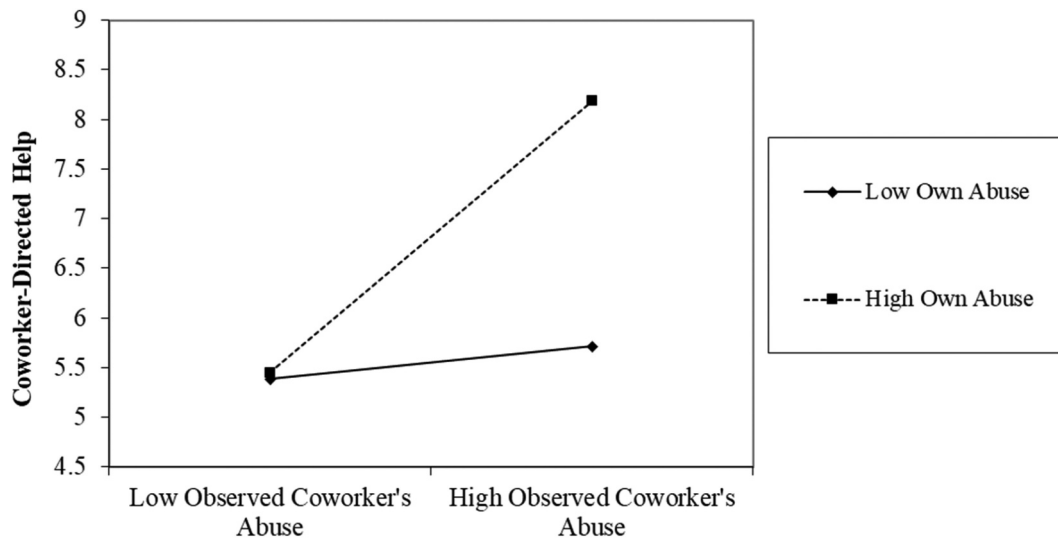[†]p < .1, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 3. Interactive effect of observed co-worker's abuse and employee's own abuse on co-worker-directed help (Study 2).

worker's abuse and employee's own abuse, and measured mediating mechanisms such as empathy, affiliation motivation, guilt, and shame, as well as employees' helping behaviours towards co-workers.

Method

Participants
Similar to Study 1, we posted a survey seeking 800 U.S. residents on MTurk. In response, 976 participants started taking our survey. After excluding participants who did not finish our survey, we obtained a sample of 941 participants (M_{age} = 35.57 years, SD_{age} = 11.33, 97 missing values; 513 women, 328 men, 2 other, 98 missing values). Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four scenarios, which were similar to those used in Study 1. Following the scenarios, participants were asked to complete manipulation checks, the measures of empathy, affiliation motivation, guilt, and shame, and their intended help behaviours towards co-workers.

Procedure
The manipulation of observed co-worker's abuse involved the same set of email messages as used in Study 1. Likewise, the manipulation of employee's own abuse contained the same set of email messages as used in Study 1.

Employee empathy. Employee empathy towards co-workers was measured using the four-item scale developed by Batson et al. (1995). They were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt sympathetic, compassionate, softhearted, and tender towards their co-workers on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" (α = .96).

Employee affiliation motivation. We measured employee affiliation motivation using the five-item scale developed by Van Kleef et al. (2008). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with items such as "I feel close to Casey and

Riley" on a 7-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (α = .95).

Employee guilt. We used the four-item scale developed by O'Keefe and Figgé (1999) to measure employee guilt. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they felt guilty, remorseful, regretful, and sorry for the team leader's treatment on their co-workers on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" (α = .92).

Employee shame. We adopted the four-item scale developed by O'Keefe and Figgé (1999)to measure employee shame. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt ashamed, humiliated, disgraced, and embarrassed for the team leader's treatment on their co-workers on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" (α = .97).

Co-worker-directed help. Participants were asked to report their intended help behaviours towards co-workers based on the seven-item full scale developed by Williams and Anderson (1991) (e.g., "I would go out of way to help Casey and Riley" and "I would assist Casey and Riley with their work (when not asked)). Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" (α = .95).

Manipulation check. The same measures of observed co-worker's (α = .99) and employee's own (α = .96) abuse manipulation checks were used as in Study 1.

Control variables. Prior research suggests that observing co-workers' abuse may lead to employees' resentment towards abusive supervisors (Mitchell et al., 2015) and their schadenfreude at co-workers' abuse (Xu et al., 2020), which in turn can reduce their supportive behaviours towards abused co-workers. To eliminate the potential effects of resentment and schadenfreude on our results, we controlled for these two factors in our analyses. We assessed employee resentment using Feather and Sherman's (2002) 4-item scale. Participants were asked to report

the extent to which they felt angry, indignant, resentful, and a feeling of injustice for team leader's treatment on their co-workers on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" (α = .96). We measured employee schadenfreude using Feather and Sherman's (2002) 3-item scale. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they felt happy, satisfied, and pleasure for team leader's treatment on their co-workers on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" (α = .98).

Data analysis

Before testing our hypotheses, we first examined whether our manipulation was successful. Participants in the *high observed co-worker's abuse* condition (*M* = 5.68, *SD* = 1.83) rated team leaders' abusive behaviours towards co-workers higher than those in the *low observed co-worker's abuse* condition (*M* = 1.58, *SD* = 1.25; *t*(917) = 39.59, *p* < .001; Cohen's *d* = 2.62). Furthermore, participants in the *high employee's own abuse* condition (*M* = 5.18, *SD* = 1.58) rated the team leader's abusive behaviours towards themselves higher than those in the *low employee's own abuse* condition (*M* = 1.79, *SD* = 1.26; *t*(914) = 35.96, *p* < .001; Cohen's *d* = 2.38). These findings thus suggest

that our experimental manipulations were successful. We then conducted 2 × 2 ANOVA analyses to test Hypotheses 1 and 3, and conducted SEM analyses with robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimates using Mplus 8.4 (Muthén,) to test Hypotheses 2 and 4.

Results

The descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of the variables included in this study are displayed in Table 3.

Results from a 2 (observed co-worker's abuse: high versus low) × 2 (employee's own abuse: high versus low) analysis of variance indicated that there was a significant observed co-worker's abuse × employee's own abuse interaction in predicting co-worker-directed help (*F*(1, 930) = 63.84, *p* < .001, partial η^2 = .06). As shown in Figure 4, simple effect analysis indicated that in the *low observed co-worker's abuse* condition, participants in the *low employee's own abuse* condition (*M* = 4.85, *SD* = 1.27) reported greater co-worker-directed help than those in the *high employee's own abuse* condition (*M* = 3.80, *SD* = 1.54; *p* < .001; Cohen's *d* = 0.75). Nevertheless, in the *high observed co-worker's abuse* condition, participants in the *high employee's*

Table 3. Descriptive statistics, Reliability, and correlations among variables (Study 3).

Variables	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Observed co-worker's abuse[a]	.50	.50	−.00	−2.00									
2. Own abuse[b]	.50	.50	.01	−2.00	.02								
3. Empathy	3.86	1.91	.01	−1.17	.57***	.01	(.96)						
4. Affiliation motivation	4.42	1.37	−.52	.11	.24***	−.08*	.62***	(.95)					
5. Guilt	2.56	1.71	.83	−.47	.50***	.07*	.56***	.34***	(.92)				
6. Shame	3.18	2.07	.42	−1.24	.58***	.20***	.57***	.28***	.71***	(.97)			
7. Resentment	3.67	2.05	.06	−1.39	.60***	.29***	.52***	.18***	.61***	.73***	(.96)		
8. Schadenfreude	2.43	1.87	1.04	−.25	−.56***	−.26***	−.13***	.19***	−.27***	−.42***	−.57***	(.98)	
9. Coworker-directed help	4.60	1.41	−.42	−.41	.18***	−.12***	.61***	.67***	.28***	.23***	.15***	.21***	(.95)

Notes. N = 922–941. Pairwise deletion is used. Reliability estimates (Cronbach alpha coefficients) are presented along the diagonal in parentheses.
[a]Observed co-worker's abuse: 0 = low observed co-worker's abuse condition; 1 = high observed co-worker's abuse condition.
[b]Own abuse: 0 = low own abuse condition; 1 = high own abuse condition.
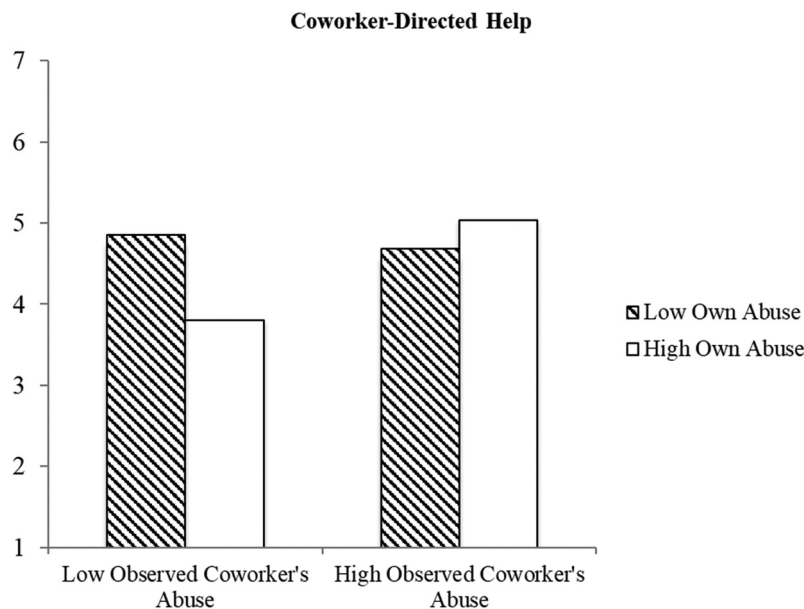*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 4. Interactive effect of observed co-worker's abuse and employee's own abuse on co-worker-directed help (Study 3).

Table 4. Conditional indirect effects for coworker-directed help (Study 3).

Hypothesis	Indirect Effect Path	Level of Moderator	Indirect Effect	95% CI
H2a	Observed co-worker's abuse → Empathy → Co-worker-directed help	Low	.436	[.314, .558]
		High	.883	[.697, 1.070]
		Difference	.447	[.294, .600]
H2b	Observed co-worker's abuse → Affiliation motivation → Co-worker-directed help	Low	.002	[−.086, .089]
		High	.468	[.342, .594]
		Difference	.466	[.313, .619]
H4a	Observed co-worker's abuse → Guilt → Co-worker-directed help	Low	.000	[−.092, .091]
		High	.000	[−.084, .084]
		Difference	.000	[−.007, .007]
H4b	Observed co-worker's abuse → Shame → Co-worker-directed help	Low	−.028	[−.140, .084]
		High	−.030	[−.148, .089]
		Difference	−.002	[−.010, .007]

own abuse condition ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.19$) reported greater co-worker-directed help than those in the *low employee's own abuse* condition ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.32$; $p < .05$; Cohen's $d = 0.28$). These results therefore provide strong support for Hypothesis 1, that high employee's own abuse strengthens the relationship between observed co-worker's abuse and co-worker-directed help, but not for Hypothesis 3.

Table 4 displays the results of our full model (−2Loglikelihood = −41474.135, number of free parameters = 115; Akaike (AIC) = 83178.271; Bayesian (BIC) = 83734.934). The results showed that the indirect effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help via employee empathy was stronger when employee's own abuse was high (coefficient = .883, $SE = .095$, 95% CI = [.697, 1.070]) than when it was low (coefficient = .436, $SE = .062$, 95% CI = [.314, .558]). The index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) revealed that the difference between the two coefficients was significant (coefficient = .447, $SE = .078$, 95% CI = [.294, .600]), providing support for Hypothesis 2a. Similarly, the indirect effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help via employee affiliation motivation was stronger when employee's own abuse was high (coefficient = .468, $SE = .064$, 95% CI = [.342, .594]) than when employee's own abuse was low (coefficient = .002, $SE = .045$, 95% CI = [−.086, .089]). The index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) revealed that the difference between the two coefficients was significant (coefficient = .466, $SE = .078$, 95% CI = [.313, .619]). These findings therefore provide support for Hypothesis 2b.

However, the results do not support Hypotheses 4a and 4b. The indirect effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help via employee guilt was not significant, regardless of when employee's own abuse was low (coefficient = .000, $SE = .047$, 95% CI = [−.092, .091]) or high (coefficient = .000, $SE = .043$, 95% CI = [−.084, .084]). Moreover, the index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) revealed that the difference between the two coefficients was not significant (coefficient = .000, $SE = .004$, 95% CI = [−.007, .007]). Likewise, the indirect effect of observed co-worker's abuse on co-worker-directed help via employee shame was not significant, regardless of when employee's own abuse was low (coefficient = −.028, $SE = .057$, 95% CI = [−.140, .084]) or high (coefficient = −.030, $SE = .061$, 95% CI = [−.148, .089]). The index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) further indicated that the difference between the two coefficients

was not significant (coefficient = −.002, $SE = .004$, 95% CI = [−.010, .007]).

Discussion

Using an experiment, Study 3 found that sharing the negative mistreatment experience with their co-workers increased employees' empathy and affiliation motivation, which in turn promoted their help towards abused co-workers. Therefore, Study 3 identified empathy and affiliation motivation as two important mechanisms explaining the altruistically motivated view of helping.

General discussion

The present research takes employees' own abuse into account to examine how it alters employees' help behaviours towards co-workers being abused. Drawing on the altruistically and egoistically motivated views of helping, our study proposes and tests competing hypotheses about employees' altruistic versus egoistic motivation to help abused co-workers. Across two experiment studies and a field study, the results provided support for the altruistically motivated view of helping – employees helped their abused co-workers more when they themselves were also abused by the supervisor. This is because sharing the negative mistreatment experience with their co-workers increased employees' empathy and affiliation motivation and, in turn, their help towards abused co-workers. Overall, these findings offer important theoretical and practical implications and valuable directions for future research.

Theoretical implications

Our research makes a number of significant contributions to the literature. First, our research contributes to the abusive supervision literature. Recent years have seen a growing number of studies that examine abusive supervision from the observer's perspective (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2015; Priesemuth, 2013; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019). However, there are inconsistent findings regarding whether employees help vs. withhold help towards co-workers when they observe their co-workers are being abused by the supervisor. To reconcile these findings, extant research has examined the boundary roles of co-worker-related (e.g., rivalry and perceived goal competitiveness; Chen et al.,

2021; Xu et al., 2020) and organization-related factors (e.g., organizational justice; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019) in influencing employees' helping responses to co-workers' abuse. We extend this line of work by considering employees' personal experiences – whether they were abused by their supervisor – as a boundary factor that shapes their helping reactions to abused co-workers. In doing so, we demonstrate that how employees as observers can be an integral part of the abusive supervision process, thereby showcasing the dynamic role of observers in the perpetrator-victim-observer interface.

Second, by considering the role of employees' own abuse in shaping their helping responses to co-workers' abuse, we reconcile competing theoretical predictions regarding employees' motivation to help abused co-workers. Specifically, our research takes a step towards reconciling the altruistically and egoistically motivated views of helping by introducing employee's own abuse as an *inference test factor* (Platt, 1964). Our findings found support for the altruistically motivated view of helping but not for the egoistically motivated view of helping, thereby demonstrating that employees are more likely to help their abused co-workers when they are themselves also being abused. This is because the common mistreatment experience evokes employees' empathy towards and affiliation with abused co-workers, which in turn stimulate their altruistic motivation to help abused co-workers. By examining employees' own abuse as an inference test factor that pits competing theoretical explanations against one another, our study provides a novel perspective on examining employees' responses to co-workers' abuse. In addition, given there is an increasing interest in examining bystander employees' responses to other types of mistreatment in the workplace (e.g., workplace bullying; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Ng et al., 2020; Niven et al., 2020; Paull et al., 2012), our study also sheds new light on the important role of bystanders' own mistreatment in shaping their responses to others' mistreatment.

Third, we echo the extant injustice research by showcasing the "misery loves company" phenomenon in the victimization literature. Although a number of studies in the field of injustice have demonstrated that people who are exposed to injustice victims are more likely to experience victim empathy or guilt when they are personally receiving injustice treatment (e.g., Kray & Lind, 2002; Spencer & Rupp, 2009), little research has examined whether this phenomenon also exists in the victimization field in general, and the abusive supervision field specifically. Given observed mistreatment is fundamentally an assessment of injustice (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Oh & Farh, 2017), people who observe others being mistreated and therefore evaluate this kind of mistreatment as unfair would also experience empathy when they are personally subject to mistreatment behaviours. Our research uses two experiment studies and a field study to directly test this idea in the abusive supervision context.

Fourth, the present research advances our understanding of observers' emotional reactions after witnessing their co-workers' being abused. While existing research has examined observers' emotional responses to co-workers' abuse, previous work has primarily focused on observers' *other-directed emotions*, such as anger towards the supervisor and schadenfreude and contentment about co-workers' experienced abuse

(Mitchell et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2020). Distinct from this line of research, our research also looks at *self-directed emotions*, such as shame and guilt, along with other-directed emotions, such as empathy. By integrating both self-directed emotions and other-directed emotions into the same model, we expand the spectrum of observers' emotional reactions to observed co-worker's abuse. We further examine whether observers' own level of abuse influences the emotions that they experience upon viewing their co-workers being abused.

Finally, our research contributes to the literature on counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) prevention. Prior research has shown that observing co-worker abuse triggers employees' anger and schadenfreude, which in turn led to less helping and more CWB towards co-workers (Mitchell et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2020), thereby prompting a spiral of destructive work behaviours in the workplace. Departing from this line of work, our research identified the role of other discrete emotions, such as empathy, guilt, and shame, and found that empathy can motivate employees to help their abused co-workers. This finding converges with past research which has found that empathy can also help prevent CWB (e.g., Clark et al., 2019; Ho & Gupta, 2012). Together, this research demonstrates the important role of empathy in evoking constructive work behaviours and preventing destructive work behaviours. Doing so also answers the call from researchers for broadening the range of discrete emotions when examining the enactment and prevention of destructive work behaviours in the workplace (e.g., Bauer & Spector, 2015; Fida et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022).

Practical implications

Our research also has important implications for managerial practice. First, our research shows that witnessing co-workers being abused can make employees feel empathy towards abused co-workers, particularly when employees have themselves been abused. As empathy has been theorized as "a way of knowing another's affect" (Wispé, 1986, p. 316) and trying to "live the attitudes of the other" (Rogers, 1951, p. 29), employees who empathize with abused co-workers may go through the same negative experiences (e.g., fear, Simon et al., 2015; and stress; Duffy et al., 2002) as their abused co-workers. In this sense, abusive supervision can trigger a cycle of negative consequences among victims and bystanders alike. These findings underscore the importance for managers to control the incidents of abusive supervision in the organization (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Second, we have demonstrated that some employees are more likely to help fellow co-workers who are abused, and that this constructive reaction is mainly elicited from those employees who are also victims of abuse. In other words, employees who are less abused are less likely to support their abused co-workers. This finding ought to serve as a warning to organizations that they should take actions to foster a compassionate and supportive work environment where employees are willing to help each other when someone is in a distressful situation (Mitchell et al., 2015). For instance, organizations can communicate the importance of co-worker support in order to encourage employees to show concern

and empathy for other teammates. More importantly, to prevent the harm caused by supervisory abuse on employees, organizations should provide employees with a safe and anonymous channel to whistle blow supervisors' abusive behaviours.

Third, research has shown that engaging in citizenship behaviour may make employees feel entitled, which "can act as moral credentials that psychologically free employees to engage in both interpersonal and organizational deviance" (Yam et al., 2017, p. 373). This finding suggests that employees who help their abused co-workers may be more likely to engage in CWB, as their moral credentials gained from past good behaviours can entitle them to enact CWB without discrediting themselves (Loi et al., 2020; Merritt et al., 2012). To reduce this negative effect of help towards abused co-workers, organizations can emphasize the purpose and value of helping behaviours (e.g., creating a harmonious and productive workplace) so that employees will be intrinsically motivated to help others, which would reduce their entitlement to engage in CWB (Yam et al., 2017). In addition, research has suggested that moral licencing process can be weakened when good behaviours are not seen as discretionary (e.g., Klotz & Bolino, 2013; Loi et al., 2020). Therefore, organizations can pressure employees to help each other so that employees will not gain moral credits, thereby reducing their tendency to engage in CWB.

Limitations and future research directions

Despite these theoretical and practical implications, our research has some limitations that provide opportunities for future research. First, we measured the mediators (empathy, affiliation motivation, guilt, and shame) and the dependent variable (co-worker-directed help) from the same source at the same stage in Study 3. A potential limitation of this research design lies in the possibility that common method variance bias might have confounded our findings. However, the primary focus of the present research is on testing interaction effects, which are not affected by common method bias (Evans, 1985; Podsakoff et al., 2012; Siemsen et al., 2010). Furthermore, it is worth noting that when evaluating perceptual variables, internal states, and feelings, self-report data is generally viewed as the most valid approach (Chan, 2009). In spite of these points, future research may benefit from collecting multi-wave, multi-source data for these variables.

Second, our research primarily focused on emotional factors (i.e., empathy, shame, and guilt) as the mechanisms underlying employees' likelihood of helping their co-workers who are being abused. Although these emotional factors help provide a comparative test of two different theories––the altruistically vs. the egoistically motivated view of helping––future research can explore other potential mechanisms. For instance, prior research suggests that "identification defines the social exchange relationship with others, which in turn influences extra-role behaviour" (Liu et al., 2010, p. 192). People who identify with others (e.g., the organization, the supervisor, etc.) may engage in extra-role behaviours towards others as a reciprocity of the social exchange with others (e.g., Blader & Tyler, 2009; Liu et al., 2010). Therefore, future research can

examine whether employees' identification with co-workers influences how much they help co-workers who are abused.

Third, drawing from the egoistically motivated view of helping, we proposed guilt and shame as the underlying mechanisms explaining the weaken effect of employee's own abuse on the positive relationship between observed co-worker's abuse and co-worker-directed help. Another potential mechanism underlying this interaction effect could be ego depletion (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Baumeister et al., 1998). When employees and their co-workers both experience abusive supervision, this shared mistreatment experience can make employees' experience of abuse more credible (cf. Kray & Lind, 2002), and therefore, lead them to ruminate about the mistreatment experience (Liao et al., 2021). When employees replay this mistreatment experience in their mind, their self-regulation resources will be depleted (e.g., Hahm, 2011; Mackey et al., 2020; McAllister et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2020), thereby leaving them with fewer resources to help their abused co-workers. Therefore, ego depletion could be another underlying mechanism that explains why employees are less likely to help abused co-workers when they are abused themselves. Future research can explore whether ego depletion serves as an alternate mechanism.[1]

Fourth, research has shown that people's reactions to abusive supervision are influenced by their attribution for supervisors' abusive behaviours (e.g., Liu et al., 2012; Schyns et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2023; Yu & Duffy, 2021). Specifically, employees may attribute abusive supervision either to leaders' intention to enhance employees' performance (i.e., performance promotion attribution) or to leaders' intention to purposely harm employees (i.e., injury initiation attribution; Liu et al., 2012). Research has found that when employees engage in performance promotion attribution, they tend to respond to leader abuse in a favourable way, and when they engage in injury initiation attribution, in an unfavourable way (Liao et al., 2021; Yu & Duffy, 2021). Applying this finding to our context suggests that employees' reactions to co-workers' abuse may depend on their attribution of leader abuse – performance promotion attribution and injury initiation attribution serve as second-stage moderators in our theoretical model. Specifically, we expect that performance promotion attribution would strengthen the effects of employees' empathy, affiliation motivation, guilt, and shame on co-worker-directed help, whereas injury initiation attribution would weaken these effects. Future research can investigate this idea.

Fifth, abusive supervision is only one type of mistreatment experienced by employees in the workplace. Other types of mistreatment include workplace bullying. Recent research on workplace bullying has begun to examine bullying from the bystander perspective (e.g., D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Ng et al., 2020, 2022; Niven et al., 2020; Paull et al., 2012). This line of research has proposed that bystanders' responses to witnessed bullying are influenced by social contextual factors, such as the severity of bullying, victim deservingness, bystanders' self-efficacy, and bystanders' friendship with the victim (e.g., D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Ng et al., 2020). As our research has shown that bystanders' own mistreatment experience shapes their responses to others' mistreatment, we expect that our findings would replicate in the workplace bullying context.

Future research can test this possibility by examining how employees' own experience with bullying influences their helping responses to co-workers' experienced bullying.

Another limitation of our research is the broad operationalization of employees' help towards abused co-workers. Apart from those helping behaviours examined in our study (e.g., going out of way to help abused co-workers, assisting abused co-workers with their work), other forms of help include moral voice (e.g., reporting leader abuse to the upper-level manager, that is, abusive leader's direct supervisor) or confronting the abusive leader. As these types of helping behaviour can directly rectify the root of abusive supervision, they will help abused co-workers avoid leader abuse in the long run. However, as reporting leader abuse to the upper-level manager and confronting the abusive leader directly may trigger abusive leaders' retaliation against employees, employees who want to engage in these helping behaviours should have high moral efficacy. Past research has found that employees with high moral efficacy are more likely to engage in ethical behaviours such as moral voice (e.g., Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018; Lee et al., 2017). Future research can thus test whether high moral efficacy can lead to behaviours other than helping co-workers, such as reporting or confronting the abusive leader.

Although our findings showed that employees who were abused themselves were willing to help their abused co-workers due to empathy and affiliation with co-workers, other mechanisms might also be active simultaneously. Mistreatment is cognitively depleting, so mistreated employees have fewer mental resources available (Whitman et al., 2014; Wu & Hu, 2009; Yuan et al., 2020). And helping is not without cost for employees. Past research has found that as helping requires additional resources, employees who routinely help others experience greater role overload, job stress, and work-family conflict (Bolino et al., 2004, 2013). Therefore, it is possible that employees who experience abuse themselves may not help abused co-workers for the purpose of conserving their limited resources. Future research can test this possibility.

Finally, we collected sample from different cultures (i.e., the United States and China) to test our theoretical model, and found that our model generalized to both cultures. However, as we adopted an experimental design in the United States but a field survey design in China, it is not possible to directly compare the results. Future research can conduct this study in multiple cultures using identical methods to assess whether there are cultural similarities or differences in this phenomenon.

Conclusion

This research represents an initial attempt to examine the role of employees' own experience with abusive supervision in shaping their helping responses to abused co-workers. Drawing on the altruistically and egoistically motivated views of helping, we proposed competing hypotheses about whether employees who were themselves abused were willing to help their abused co-workers. Across three studies that employed different research designs (i.e., two experiments and a multi-wave, multi-source field study) and were conducted in different cultures (i.e., the United States and China), our findings provide support for the altruistically motivated view of helping – employees who

experienced abuse themselves were better able to empathize with their abused co-workers, and thus helped these co-workers more. These findings highlight the vital role of employees' own abuse in shaping their responses to co-workers' abuse and shed light on how focal employees can prevent the spiral of destructive behaviour in the workplace through their help towards mistreated co-workers. Although there remains much work to be done, we hope our study fuels scholars' interest to further explore how employees' own mistreatment experience impacts their responses to others' mistreatment, and identify additional means through which destructive behaviours in the workplace can be prevented so that we can create a more harmonious workplace.

Note

1. We appreciate an anonymous reviewer for offering this insightful idea.

Data availability statement

The materials, data, and analytic code are available on Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/zhk3n/?view_only= 647a78de266d455a8d95a57db7f75d32

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