



# Angry but not Deviant: Employees' Prior-Day Deviant Behavior Toward the Family Buffers Their Reactions to Abusive Supervisory Behavior

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## Abstract

Integrating affective events theory, work-family compensation, and moral balance theory, the present study proposes a model that examines how and when abusive supervisory behavior is related to employees' deviant behavior toward their supervisor. Using a diary method that involved two surveys per day over two weeks, we found support for our model based on 707 daily observations from 130 employees. Specifically, anger toward one's supervisor mediated the relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and deviant behavior toward one's supervisor. In addition, the degree to which employees engaged in deviant behavior toward their supervisor depended on their prior-day deviant behavior toward their family. When employees engaged in lower prior-day deviant behavior toward their family, anger toward their supervisor was positively related to subsequent deviant behavior toward their supervisor. In contrast, when employees had higher prior-day deviant behavior toward their family, the relationship between anger toward their supervisor and deviant behavior toward their supervisor was weaker. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for research on abusive supervision, work-family interface, and moral balance theory.

**Keywords** Abusive supervisory behavior · Family deviant behavior · Affective events theory · Moral balance theory · Work-family compensation

## Introduction

Abusive supervision refers to subordinates' perceptions of "the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, excluding physical contact" from the supervisor (Tepper 2000, p. 178). Due to its pernicious nature, past research has shown that abusive supervision can elicit negative reactions from victims and observers such as deviant behaviors towards the supervisor (e.g., Park et al. 2019; Vogel and Mitchell 2017). To minimize the negative effects of abusive supervision, past research has examined potential moderators that may decrease employees' negative responses, such as supervisor/employee personality (e.g., Shao et al. 2018) and organizational structure (e.g., Aryee et al. 2008).

Despite these insightful findings, this stream of research has two critical limitations. First, with a predominant focus on the work context, extant research fails to consider how events in other life domains, such as the family domain, may permeate into the work domain to predict employees' reactions to abusive supervision (Lanaj et al. 2018). An assumption behind this omission is that the family domain is a passive recipient of the influence of abusive supervision,

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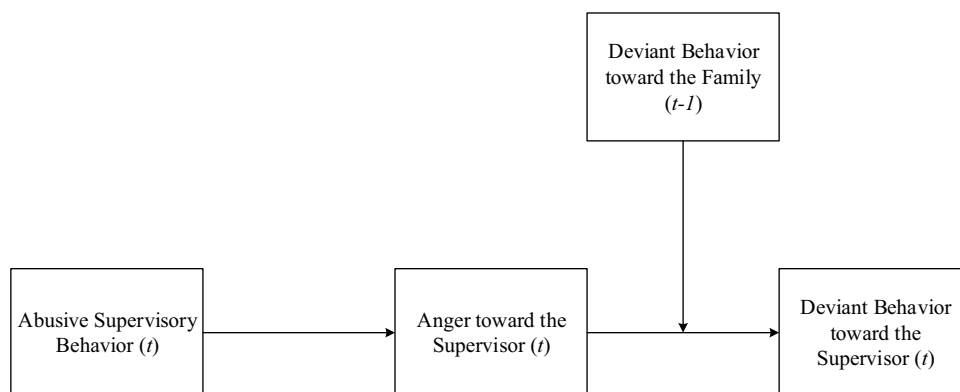
as opposed to playing an active role in shaping employees' responses to abusive supervision (Carlson et al. 2011). Second, as Mazar and Zhong (2010, p. 497) noted, "people do not make decisions in a vacuum, their decisions are embedded in a history of behaviors." In other words, people exhibit the current behavior against the backdrop of their prior behavior, especially when the prior behavior occurs rather recently. For example, research on psychological licensing shows that after engaging in moral behaviors, individuals feel licensed to subsequently exhibit morally questionable behavior. To illustrate, individuals who purchased green products (products that are environmentally friendly) were subsequently more likely to engage in unethical behavior such as stealing money (Mazar and Zhong 2010; Zhong et al. 2009). These arguments suggest that without considering employees' behavioral history, our understanding of how employees respond to abusive supervision is incomplete at best and erroneous at worst.

To address these limitations, we adopt a within-person perspective to investigate how employees' behavioral history within the family domain is related to their subsequent reactions to abusive supervisory behavior, defined as "any display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior excluding physical contact" by the supervisor (Barnes et al. 2015, p. 1420). Our proposed model integrates affective events theory (AET, Weiss and Cropanzano 1996), work-family compensation (Dishon-Berkovits 2014; Menges et al. 2017; Wiese et al. 2010), and moral balance theory (Nisan 1991) to explain the emotional process underlying employees' deviant reactions to abusive supervisory behavior and how their behavioral history at home may disrupt this process. AET posits that emotions are amenable to significant fluctuations as a function of one's daily experiences. Research has suggested that people experience anger when their core values are under threat (Rodell and Judge 2009). Since abusive treatment of employees violates fundamental moral values, on days when employees experience abusive supervisory behavior, they may experience anger toward the abuser (Liao et al. 2018; Oh and Farh 2017; Simon et al. 2015). In

addition, we predict that daily anger toward the supervisor mediates the effect of daily abusive supervisory behavior on daily deviant behavior toward the supervisor.

Moreover, we examine how employees' experiences in the family domain may moderate the relationship between daily anger toward their supervisor and daily deviant behavior toward their supervisor. The work-family literature posits that work and family domains are interconnected, and an individual's experience in one life domain may impact the experience of the same individual in a different life domain (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). In particular, the experience in one domain may serve to compensate for the experience of another, thereby counterpoising its effects (Hewett et al. 2017; Wiese et al. 2010). We therefore focus on employees' engagement in deviant behavior toward their family as a family-domain event that balances their engagement in deviant behavior toward the supervisor as an angry reaction to being abused. To understand this effect, we draw upon the moral balance theory (Klotz and Bolino 2013; Nisan 1991), which suggests that due to the desire to maintain a moral self-image, individuals who have just displayed morally questionable behaviors may be less likely to engage in immoral behaviors subsequently. Deviance is a type of immoral behavior that violates social norms and harms the well-being of other people (Klotz and Bolino 2013; Robinson and Bennett 1995). Integrating the work-family compensation and moral balance perspectives, we propose that even though employees may feel angry upon experiencing abusive supervisory treatment, those who engaged in deviant behavior toward their family on the prior day are less likely to vent their anger in deviant behavior toward their supervisor. Thus, we suggest that, paradoxically, prior-day deviant behavior toward the family may buffer the positive relationship between anger and deviant behavior toward the supervisor. Taken together, we advance a moderated mediation model (Fig. 1) in which prior-day deviant behavior toward the family weakens the indirect relationship between daily abusive supervisory behavior and employee deviant behavior toward the supervisor through anger.

Fig. 1 Hypothesized model



Our paper aims at making the following contributions to the literature. First, past research on how employees respond to abusive supervision does not consider the role that their behavioral history plays. Our study is unique in that we draw on work-family compensation and moral balance theory to propose a cross-domain process such that the extent to which victims of supervisory abuse at work may respond in a deviant manner varies as a function of how they treated their family members earlier at home. Thus, by examining the sequence of employee behaviors in two separate domains—deviant behavior at home and at work—we offer a more comprehensive picture of how people respond to abusive supervision. Second, although abusive supervisory behavior is “one of the most emotionally salient and disturbing affective events employees experience at work” (Oh and Farh 2017, p. 208), research has yet to capture daily emotional responses from the victims of such abusive treatment. Thus, we respond to the criticism that the lack of studies in specific emotions “may be particularly problematic in the context of research on interpersonal mistreatment” (Simon et al. 2015, p. 1799). Third, extant research suggests a flowing downhill argument such that being abused at work may precipitate deviant behavior at home (Hoobler and Brass 2006). In contrast, we propose the need to examine whether deviant behavior toward the family may buffer how employees respond to abusive supervisory behavior.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, we challenge the assumption that the outcome of deviant behavior toward the family is invariably negative and present a more nuanced view on how such problematic behaviors at home may have unintended consequences at work.

## Theoretical Development

AET underscores the role emotions play in determining how employees respond to workplace events (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). The theory suggests that workplace events may arouse emotions. For example, receiving a promotion or a pay raise may lead to happiness but a customer's insult may lead to the experience of embarrassment. The theory further posits that emotions may trigger affect-driven behavior. For example, anger may lead to a behavioral tendency to attack in order to retaliate against the individuals causing the anger (Simon et al. 2015). Importantly, the theory suggests that individuals develop immediate emotional responses after relevant work events.

In the present study, we examine abusive supervisory behavior as episodic events that trigger employees' anger, which is related to subsequent deviant behavior toward their supervisor. Although abusive supervision was initially

conceptualized as a stable leadership style (e.g., Tepper 2000), recent research has demonstrated a considerable amount of variability in abusive behaviors within the same leader (Johnson et al. 2012; McClean et al. 2019). Abusive supervisory behavior includes specific behaviors such as invading employees' privacy, insulting them, breaking earlier promises, and being dishonest with them (Martinko et al. 2013; Tepper 2000, 2007; Tepper et al. 2017). Abusive supervisory behavior causes harm to others (Tepper 2007), creates distress (Restubog et al. 2011), threatens employees' wellbeing (Oh and Farh 2017), and produces negative emotions (Peng et al. 2019). Following AET (Judge et al. 2006), we suggest that abusive supervisory behavior is a significant event that predicts employees' anger, an “intense, negatively valenced emotion” (Oh and Farh 2017, p. 217), because it violates two fundamental moral principles: interpersonal care and justice (Liao et al. 2018). Interpersonal care includes behaviors such as expressing concerns and building up employees' self-esteem, whereas justice includes treating employees with respect and dignity (Colquitt 2001). Abusive supervisory behavior violates these fundamental moral principles. On the days when employees perceive that their supervisor's behavior violates these basic moral standards, they may experience greater anger than on the days when they do not experience such abusive behavior.

Due to a loss of personal dignity attributed to the abusive treatment from the supervisor, anger can trigger an immediate behavioral tendency to fight (Cannon 1932; Oh and Farh 2017). Past research has suggested that angry victims of abuse may direct their anger toward the abuser. Employees engage in deviant behavior as a means to retaliate against the abuser and to remove the source of personal harm (Simon et al. 2015; Tepper et al. 2017), to restore a sense of self-worth (Vogel and Mitchell 2017), and to gain a measure of personal satisfaction (Oh and Farh 2017). Expressing this sentiment, Thau and Mitchell (2010, p. 1009) noted that “employees harm the organization, supervisor, and other members with deviant behavior to pay back organizational authority for abuse.” Judge et al. (2006, p. 128) noted that deviant behavior is an adaptation that “takes places on a real-time basis.” In accordance with AET, at the within-person level, fluctuations in anger toward the supervisor may predict fluctuations in deviant behavior toward the supervisor.

**Hypothesis 1** Daily anger toward the supervisor mediates the relationship between daily abusive supervisory behavior and daily deviant behavior toward the supervisor.

Although these arguments suggest that employees who experience anger due to abusive supervisory behavior may engage in deviant behavior, it is important to note that “individuals are not blindly guided only by their emotions” and that “emotion only moderately accounts for

<sup>1</sup> We controlled for the effect of daily abusive supervisory behavior on deviant behavior toward the family in our research.

(unethical) behavior” (Mitchell et al. 2015, p. 1055). In particular, AET is relatively silent on how individuals’ behavioral history may either exacerbate or reduce the action tendency driven by the emotions. Past research has shown that family factors and moral considerations may predict the extent to which individuals act on their anger (Liu et al. 2017; Mitchell et al. 2015). Accordingly, we integrate AET with work-family compensation (Menges et al. 2017; Wiese et al. 2010) and moral balance theory (Klotz and Bolino 2013; Nisan 1991) to explicate the role of employee prior-day deviant behavior toward the family as a potential behavioral history that moderates their later reactions to anger due to abusive supervisory treatment.

The boundary between the work and family domains is permeable, such that participation in one domain may have implications for one’s experiences and behavior in another domain (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). In particular, scholars have advanced the notion of work-family compensation, such that the experience or behavior in one domain may compensate (or buffer) the experience or behavior in another domain (Wiese et al. 2010). For example, Barnett et al. (1992) found that family role quality moderated the effect of work characteristics on psychological distress whereas Tariq and Ding (2018) found that the effect of abusive supervision on employee job performance was weaker when family motivation was high. These findings suggest that the positive and negative experiences across domains may counterbalance each other in an interactive manner (Dishon-Berkovits 2014). However, most of the work-family compensation research focuses on how the positive experience in one domain may offset the negative experience in the other (Wiese et al. 2010). It is less clear whether and how individuals’ deviant behaviors in one domain may predict their reactions as victims in another domain. To fill this void, we examine how employees’ deviant behavior toward their family members, such as their parents, spouse, and children, may moderate their reactions to abusive supervisory behavior.

Individuals are embedded within a family system where they frequently engage in interactions with family members. It is likely that they may engage in deviant actions that violate moral, social, and/or family norms, such as acting in an unpleasant manner to their parents, insulting their spouse, or harshly criticizing their children (Restubog et al. 2011). Lim and Tai (2014, p. 352) noted that deviant behavior within the family domain may violate “the norm of mutual respect in the family,” cross “the boundaries of acceptable behavior,” and “lead to the perpetuation of uncivil behaviors in the family.” Since the work and family domains are integrated, the lack of research on how deviant behavior toward their family as a behavioral history may shape employees’ work experience, particularly how they react to abusive supervisory

behavior, may limit our knowledge of such important cross-domain dynamic.

To address this limitation, we draw upon moral balance theory, which emphasizes the importance of examining the sequential occurrence of moral (or immoral) behaviors (Nisan 1991). At its core, the theory posits that individual actions may have moral implications for one’s moral self-image (Klotz and Bolino 2013). Prior engagement of immoral actions may prompt individuals either to engage in ethical behavior or to refrain from unethical behavior (Chugh and Kern 2016; Jordan et al. 2011; Zhong et al. 2010). In contrast, prior moral actions may lead individuals to feel licensed to take the foot off the gas pedal in their moral endeavor (Cornelissen et al. 2013; Yam et al. 2017). Thus, one’s moral self-image tends to fluctuate as a function of the morality of their own actions. Past research has shown that most people want to see themselves and be seen as a moral person overall (Christy et al. 2016). Thus, they closely monitor their actions to ensure that they maintain an overall positive moral self-image.

Integrating the arguments based on work-family compensation and moral balance theory, we argue that employees’ prior-day deviant behavior toward the family as a moral history may moderate the relationship between their daily anger and daily deviant behavior toward the supervisor. Deviant behavior toward one’s family is unethical because it reduces family member’s self-worth (Hoobler and Brass 2006; Kiewitz et al. 2012) and causes them to experience distress and emotional exhaustion (Thompson et al. 2020). Such behavior violates the moral principles of treating others in a caring and humane manner (Oh and Farh 2017). Indeed, deviant behavior toward one’s family predicted family members’ well-being even after controlling for other stressors such as financial strain (Vinokur and van Ryn 1993). According to moral balance theory, people use their past behavior to determine whether their subsequent behavior should be moral or not (Ormiston and Wong 2013). Thus, in the event of experiencing abusive supervisory treatment, employees may call to mind the ethicality of their preceding behaviors before engaging in deviant behavior driven by anger (Yam et al. 2017).

Since family represents an important domain for most people, what people do at home serves as a critical behavioral reference (Bagger and Li 2012). Therefore, we suggest that employees forfeit the license to engage in immoral behaviors such as deviant behavior toward their supervisor once they have engaged in deviant behavior toward their family prior to work. Klotz and Bolino (2013, p. 303) noted that people want to restore moral balance “at the earliest opportunity suiting their desire and not conflicting with their identity orientation.” Thus, employees who engaged in deviant behavior toward their family earlier may lack moral latitude to react in a deviant manner

toward their supervisor after experiencing anger stemming from abusive supervisory behavior. In other words, the backdrop of moral self-image damage due to deviant behavior toward their family reminds employees not to act out to avoid further damaging their overall moral self-image. In contrast, low prior-day deviant behavior toward their family may give employees more leeway to indulge in immoral behavior, including engaging in deviant behavior toward their supervisor as a response to their anger due to abusive supervisory behavior (Liao et al. 2018; Yam et al. 2017). Researchers often use a banking metaphor to illustrate the concept of moral balance (Li et al. 2017a, b; Liao et al. 2018; Miller and Efron 2010). The engagement of immoral behavior results in the loss of moral credits whereas the engagement of moral behavior represents an infusion of moral credits into the bank account. Metaphorically, our argument suggests that employees draw credits from their moral bank account by engaging in deviant behavior toward their family. Thus, engaging in deviant behavior toward the supervisor subsequently may push them further into the red as they stand to lose even more moral credits. In contrast, low deviant behavior toward their family allows employees to secure their moral bank account, which gives them freedom to use the moral credits on deviant behavior toward their supervisor. Based on these arguments, we predict:

**Hypothesis 2** Prior-day deviant behavior toward the family moderates the relationship between daily anger and daily deviant behavior toward the supervisor, such that the relationship is stronger when prior-day deviant behavior toward the family is lower.

Hypothesis 1 posits that higher daily abusive supervisory behavior may be related to greater employee daily anger as an emotional response, which may predict their engagement in more deviance targeting the supervisor. However, Hypothesis 2 posits that whether employees follow through on their anger to act deviantly may depend on their prior-day deviant behavior toward their family. A higher level of prior-day deviant behavior toward their family may reduce their tendency to engage in deviant behavior toward the supervisor as an anger-fueled response to abusive supervisory behavior. In contrast, a lower level of prior-day deviant behavior toward their family may license them to act on their anger by engaging in deviant behavior toward their supervisor.

**Hypothesis 3** Prior-day deviant behavior toward the family moderates the indirect relationship between daily abusive supervisory behavior and daily deviant behavior toward the supervisor, through the mediating effect of daily anger toward the supervisor, such that the indirect effect is stronger when prior-day deviant behavior toward the family is lower.

## Alternative Model

Consistent with most of the abusive supervision research based on several recent meta-analyses (e.g., Mackey et al. 2017; Zhang and Liao 2015), our study focuses on a dependent variable (i.e., deviant behavior toward the supervisor) in the work domain. However, as an anonymous reviewer pointed out, research on abusive supervision has also demonstrated that individuals may display displaced aggression by taking out their anger toward their abusive supervisor on their family members (Hoobler and Brass 2006; Wu et al. 2012). Following the work-family compensation and moral balance logics, it is possible that prior-day or same-day deviant behavior toward the supervisor may weaken the relationship between anger toward the supervisor (due to abusive supervisory behavior) and deviant behavior toward the family. Although not the focus of our research, we empirically assessed this possibility in our study.

## Method

We recruited participants from students enrolled in online upper-level undergraduate management classes and MBA classes in two large public universities in the United States. To be eligible, potential participants had to work at least 30 h per week, work every day from around 8 am to 5 pm during the 2-week study period, and have a direct supervisor with whom they interacted regularly during the workday in the same physical location. A total of 136 individuals participated in the study. Among the participants, the average age was 30.70 ( $SD = 8.78$ ), 38% were male ( $SD = 0.49$ ), 48% were married or cohabited with a partner ( $SD = 0.50$ ), they had 0.63 child under the age of 12 ( $SD = 1.06$ ). Participants on average worked 39.80 h ( $SD = 6.74$ ) per week. They worked in a wide range of occupations (e.g., insurance agent, accountant, paralegal) in different industries (e.g., retailing, banking, IT). Since these two universities had a rather large population of commuter students who work full time and take classes online and/or in the evenings/weekends, the participants in our study were more similar to the typical full-time employees than to the typical full-time undergraduate/graduate students. Recent work-family research has challenged the tendency to only include participants who were married/partnered at the exclusion of those who were not (Li et al. 2017b). Even individuals who are single and childless have non-work commitment and engagement that involve their family members (Casper et al. 2007). For example, in their review, Casper et al. (2016) noted that single/childless adults may have significant interactions with their parents and other relatives (e.g., siblings, nieces, and nephews) and eldercare responsibilities. These authors concluded that the notion that single/childless employees have no family “does



not reflect the reality for these workers” (p. 190). For these reasons, we chose to include participants regardless of their marital/partner status.<sup>2</sup>

## Study Procedure

Participants who met the eligibility criteria could sign up for the study in exchange for extra credit. We offered those who were ineligible or not interested to participate an alternative assignment. After consenting to participate in the study, respondents received two emails every day (morning and evening) for ten working days that spanned 2 weeks (Monday–Friday for Week One and Monday–Friday for Week Two). In the morning email, they received a survey about their deviant behavior toward the supervisor and family on the previous day. In the evening email, they responded to a survey that assessed abusive supervisory behavior they experienced and their anger toward the supervisor during the day. To ensure accurate recall, the morning email, sent before 8 am, instructed participants to complete the survey before noon, whereas the evening email, sent after 5 pm, instructed participants to complete the survey before midnight. The surveys were closed at their respective deadlines.

Consistent with our theoretical model, we used prior day’s deviant behavior toward the family assessed in the morning survey from Monday through Thursday. We used abusive supervisory behavior and anger toward the supervisor in the evening survey from Monday through Thursday. Finally, to reduce common method bias, we used the next-day morning survey to assess deviant behavior toward the supervisor from the previous day. Thus, for the analysis,

<sup>2</sup> We conducted multi-group invariance analyses to determine whether the deviant behavior toward the family measure was invariant across groups with (a) different spousal status (married/partnered vs. not) and (b) child status (having a child or not). Specifically, we examined two forms of invariance: (a) configural invariance, which pertains to the same factor structure being measured in different groups, and (b) metric invariance, which assesses whether the measures are calibrated to the construct in the same way in different groups (Chan 1998; Ployhart and Vandenberg 2010; Vandenberg and Lance 2000; Vandenberg and Morelli 2016). We examined whether change of chi-square between the configural model and the metric model was significant, with a non-significant chi-square difference indicating metric invariance (Vandenberg and Lance 2000). We used deviant behavior toward the family from the first survey for the multi-group invariance analyses. First, we examined whether the deviant behavior toward the family measure was invariant as a function of spousal status. The difference between the configural model ( $\chi^2=38.38$ ,  $df=10$ ) and the metric model ( $\chi^2=45.68$ ,  $df=14$ ) was not statistically significant ( $\Delta\chi^2=7.30$ ,  $\Delta df=4$ ,  $p=.12$ ). Second, we examined whether the deviant behavior toward the family measure was invariant as a function of child status. The difference between the configural model ( $\chi^2=29.38$ ,  $df=10$ ) and the metric model ( $\chi^2=37.37$ ,  $df=14$ ) was also not statistically significant ( $\Delta\chi^2=7.99$ ,  $\Delta df=4$ ,  $p=.09$ ).

we used the work deviant variable assessed in the morning survey from Tuesday through Friday. Across 2 weeks, we received eight possible sets of responses (each set included four variables contained in three surveys) from each person. Out of possible 1088 responses, we received 707 matching responses, i.e., the ones with all variables included in the model, from 130 participants. Thus, our response rate stood at 65% at the daily within-person level.

## Measures

Participants rated measures described below on a five-point scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

### Abusive Supervisory Behavior

We assessed abusive supervisory behavior with the five-item measure ( $\alpha=0.92$ ) that Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) developed. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the behavior their direct supervisor exhibited during the day. A sample item was “My supervisor ridiculed me today.”

### Anger Toward the Supervisor

We assessed anger with the three-item measure ( $\alpha=0.92$ ) that Gino and Schweitzer (2008) developed. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the emotions they experienced toward their supervisor during the day. The items were “angry”, “furious”, and “mad”.

### Deviant Behavior Toward the Family

To operationalize deviant behavior toward the family, we used the five-item measure ( $\alpha=0.88$ ) Restubog and colleagues developed (Restubog et al. 2011). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the statements about their behaviors toward their family members on the previous day. A sample item was “I acted in an unpleasant or angry manner toward my family yesterday.” This measure was originally developed to assess family undermining, which refers to “aggressive actions that hinder family members or partners from establishing or maintaining positive interpersonal relationships” (Liao et al. 2016, p. 961). Scholars have suggested that family undermining is a type of deviant behavior because it violates family/social norms and can potentially cause harm and anguish on family members (Shimazu et al. 2013).

### Deviant Behavior Toward the Supervisor

We examined deviant behavior toward the supervisor with the eight active deviant items ( $\alpha=0.93$ ) from Ferris et al.

**Table 1** Variance partitioning of study variables

Variable	Within-person variance ( $e^2$ )	Between-person variance ( $r^2$ )	Percentage of Within-person variance (%)
Abusive supervisory behavior	0.16*	0.15*	52
Anger toward the supervisor	0.32*	0.24*	58
Deviant behavior toward the family	0.33*	0.18*	65
Deviant behavior toward the supervisor	0.05*	0.13*	28

Percentage of within-person variance is calculated as  $e^2/(e^2 + r^2)$

\* $p < 0.05$

(2016). We chose active (or approach) deviance rather than passive (or avoidance) deviance because of the moral balance model used to guide our theoretical framework. In other words, active deviant behavior represents a more severe form of moral transgression which may be inhibited by the extent to which individuals previously engaged in deviant behavior toward their family. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the deviant behavior they exhibited toward their supervisor on the previous day. A sample item was “I swore at my supervisor yesterday.”

### Control Variables

In the analysis, we controlled for various factors that are relevant to our model. First, Hoobler and Brass (2006) found that deviant behavior toward the family can be a reaction to abusive supervision. Therefore, we included in our model a direct path from prior-day abusive supervisory behavior to prior-day deviant behavior toward the family to control for such a possible effect. Second, considering the within-person change due to the day of the week effect, we controlled for day of measurement. Third, to control for autoregressive relationships, we estimated the effect of prior-day status on the current-day status for abusive supervisory behavior, anger toward the supervisor, and deviant behavior toward the supervisor. Finally, we controlled for moral disengagement,<sup>3</sup> a between-person difference that is associated with individuals' general tendency to engage in deviant behaviors to family members and coworkers (e.g., Ilies et al. 2020). We used the moral disengagement measure that Moore and colleagues developed (Moore et al. 2012,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). A sample item was “Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt.”

### Analytical Strategies

Since the daily responses were nested within each person, we conducted multi-level analyses with *Mplus 7.3* (Muthén

and Muthén 2012) to test our hypotheses. Table 1 shows the amount of variance at the between-person level, the amount of variance at the within-person level, and the percentage of within-person variance over the total variance. As seen in Table 1, for all the variables, a significant amount of the variance existed at the within-person, supporting our examination of within-person effects. Prior to the analysis, we person-mean centered the predictors because of our focus on within-person variations. We adopted a fixed-slope model because we were interested in the average within-person effects and were less concerned with how these effects vary across persons. We calculated the indirect effect and the conditional indirect effects by following the recommendations by Bauer et al. (2006) and Preacher and Selig (2012). Specifically, we used a Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications to estimate the bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) around the indirect effects. A CI that excludes zero indicates that the indirect effect is significant.

## Results

### Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To examine the distinctiveness of the study constructs, we conducted a within-person confirmatory factor analysis (CFA, Ouyang et al. 2019). The four-factor model that included abusive supervisory behavior, anger toward the supervisor, deviant behavior toward the family, and deviant behavior toward the supervisor provided an adequate fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 1182.45$ ,  $df = 183$ , CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.04). We also examined two alternative models for comparison. First, a one-factor model that collapsed all the variables together into one latent global construct fitted the data poorly ( $\chi^2 = 10,376.82$ ,  $df = 189$ , CFI = 0.26, RMSEA = 0.27, SRMR = 0.27). Second, because we assessed anger toward the supervisor and abusive supervisory behavior at the same time, we examined a three-factor model that lumped the abusive supervisory behavior and anger items into one latent variable, in addition to the other two latent constructs (deviant behavior toward one's supervisor and

<sup>3</sup> We thank one anonymous reviewer for suggesting this control variable.

**Table 2** Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Within-person level									
1. Abusive supervisory behavior ( <i>t</i> – 1)	1.23	0.55							
2. Anger toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> – 1)	1.36	0.78	0.64**						
3. Deviant behavior toward the family ( <i>t</i> – 1)	1.39	0.67	0.24**	0.22**					
4. Deviant behavior toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> – 1)	1.15	0.38	0.57**	0.46**	0.37**				
5. Abusive supervisory behavior ( <i>t</i> )	1.22	0.57	0.51**	0.43**	0.20**	0.51**			
6. Anger toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> )	1.35	0.75	0.43**	0.52**	0.26**	0.43**	0.63**		
7. Deviant behavior toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> )	1.15	0.39	0.51**	0.40**	0.34**	0.78**	0.56**	0.51**	
Between-person level									
1. Moral disengagement	1.66	0.59	0.34**	0.31**	0.26**	0.38**	0.34**	0.31**	0.38**

*N* = 707 (within-person level)/130 (between-person level). To calculate the bi-variate correlations for moral disengagement, we aggregated all within-person level variables to the between-person level

\*\**p* < 0.01

**Table 3** Standardized Bayes coefficients with credibility intervals

Variable	Coefficient	Posterior <i>SD</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
DV: deviant behavior toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> )			
Abusive supervisory behavior ( <i>t</i> )	0.074	0.041	(–0.012, 0.147)
Anger toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> )	0.146**	0.043	(0.058, 0.227)
Deviant behavior toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> – 1)	–0.045	0.067	(–0.216, 0.067)
Deviant behavior toward the family ( <i>t</i> – 1)	0.018	0.043	(–0.075, 0.096)
Anger toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> ) × deviant behavior toward the family ( <i>t</i> – 1)	–0.103*	0.041	(–0.180, –0.021)
Day	0.029	0.040	(–0.056, 0.105)
Moral disengagement	0.367**	0.083	(0.180, 0.507)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.196		
Mediator: anger toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> )			
Abusive supervisory behavior ( <i>t</i> )	0.464**	0.031	(0.400, 0.522)
Anger toward the supervisor ( <i>t</i> – 1)	0.020	0.036	(–0.053, 0.088)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.215		
Control variable for abusive supervisory behavior ( <i>t</i> )			
Abusive supervisory behavior ( <i>t</i> – 1)	–0.190**	0.035	(–0.263, –0.126)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.036		
Control variables for deviant behavior toward the family ( <i>t</i> – 1)			
Abusive supervisory behavior ( <i>t</i> – 1)	0.041	0.036	(–0.037, 0.112)
Moral disengagement	0.233*	0.096	(0.021, 0.420)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.056		

DV dependent variable, *CI* credibility interval

\*\**p* < 0.01, \**p* < 0.05

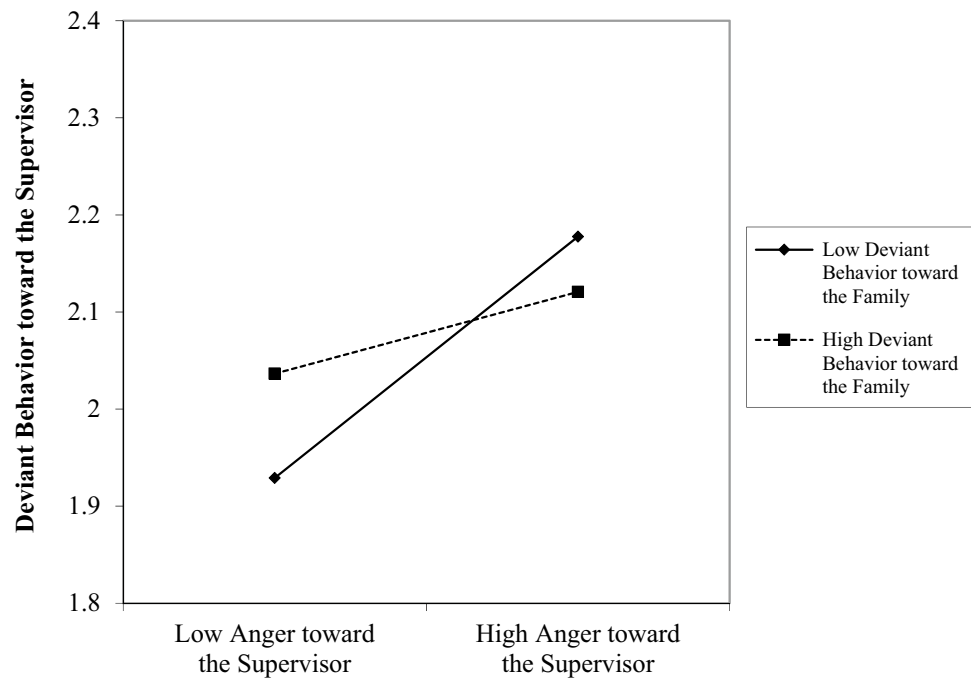
family). The three-factor model also provided a poor fit ( $\chi^2 = 2357.37$ , *df* = 186, CFI = 0.84, RMSEA = 0.12, SRMR = 0.07). These results offered reasonable assurance about the distinctiveness of the investigated constructs in our model.

**Hypothesis Testing**

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and the inter-correlations of the studied constructs. Hypothesis 1 predicted that daily abusive supervisory behavior would



**Fig. 2** Interaction between anger toward the supervisor and deviant behavior toward the family in predicting deviant behavior toward the supervisor



indirectly relate to deviant behavior toward the supervisor through anger. As shown in Table 3, consistent with our expectation, abusive supervisory behavior was positively related to anger toward the supervisor, which was related positively to deviant behavior toward the supervisor. We calculated the 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects using 20,000 Monte Carlo replications (Preacher and Selig 2012). The indirect effect was positive and significant [ $estimate = 0.068$ , 95% CI (0.028, 0.110)]. Thus, we found support for Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that prior-day deviant behavior toward the family would moderate the relationship between current-day anger toward the supervisor and deviant behavior toward the supervisor, such that the effect is stronger when prior-day deviant behavior toward the family is low (vs. high). Consistent with our expectation, results from Table 3 show that there was a significant interaction between anger toward the supervisor and deviant behavior toward the family in predicting deviant behavior toward the supervisor. Simple slope analyses showed that the relationship between anger toward the supervisor and deviant behavior toward the supervisor was stronger ( $\gamma = 0.218$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) when deviant behavior toward the family was lower (at 1 *SD* below the mean) than it was when deviant behavior toward the family was higher (at 1 *SD* above the mean) ( $\gamma = 0.074$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, we found full support for Hypothesis 2. Figure 2 presents the shape of the interaction.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 posited that deviant behavior toward the family would moderate the indirect effect of current-day abusive supervisory behavior on deviant behavior toward the supervisor through anger toward the supervisor such that the

indirect effect is stronger when deviant behavior toward the family is low (vs. high). Results of the moderated mediation analyses offered full support for our hypothesis. Specifically, the conditional indirect effect was stronger [ $estimate = 0.101$ , 95% CI (0.076, 0.128)] when deviant behavior toward the family was low (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean) than it was when deviant behavior toward the family was high (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean) [ $estimate = 0.034$ , 95% CI (0.015, 0.054)]. The difference between the two indirect effects was statistically significant [ $difference = 0.067$ , 95% CI (0.037, 0.098)]. Thus, Hypothesis 3 also received full support.

### Supplementary Analyses

We conducted a series of supplementary analyses to determine the robustness of our finding. First, we examined whether the moderation might have occurred on the first stage of the mediating model, as opposed to the second stage that we proposed. Specifically, we examined whether prior-day deviant behavior toward the family would moderate the relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and anger. Results show that the interaction between abusive supervisory behavior and deviant behavior toward the family in predicting anger was not significant,  $\gamma = 0.025$ ,  $p = 0.22$ . This finding is in line with our expectation that anger as an immediate emotional reaction is not subject to the cognitive process of moral balance. Second, we assessed prior-day deviant behavior toward the family as a moderator of the direct effect of abusive supervisory behavior on deviant behavior toward the supervisor. The interaction was not significant,  $\gamma = -0.027$ ,  $p = 0.23$ . This result further supports

our theoretical expectation that deviant behavior toward the family moderates the linkage between anger and deviant behavior toward the supervisor.

Third, we tested whether the quality of the relationship between the employee and the supervisor would moderate how the employee reacts to abusive supervisory behavior.<sup>4</sup> Although we did not measure quality of the relationship *per se*, we used the frequency of interaction with the supervisor as a proxy, as Kacmar et al. (2003) showed that interaction frequency was positively related to leader-member exchange quality. We examined whether the frequency of interaction with the supervisor would serve as a between-person moderator for the relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and anger toward the supervisor. We used a four-item measure of frequency of interaction by McAllister (1995,  $\alpha = 0.83$ ). A sample item was “I frequently initiate work-related interactions with my supervisor”). The cross-level interaction between abusive supervisory behavior and frequency of interaction with the supervisor in predicting anger toward the supervisor was not significant,  $\gamma = 0.152$ ,  $p = 0.58$ .

Fourth, we tested whether the history of being abused would alter the way employees react to abusive supervisory behavior, such that those who have a history of being abused may become less angry toward the supervisor when they experience abusive treatment from the same supervisor. Specifically, we computed the mean of daily abusive supervisory behavior as a proxy to represent employees’ history of being abused. We then used this variable as a between-person moderator of the relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and anger toward the supervisor. The cross-level interaction between abusive supervisory behavior and the mean of daily abusive supervisory behavior was not a significant predictor of anger toward the supervisor,  $\gamma = -0.697$ ,  $p = 0.10$ .

Fifth, we tested an alternative model following the same moral balance logic presented in our main model. Specifically, we examined whether deviant behavior toward the supervisor would moderate the relationship between anger toward the supervisor and deviant behavior toward the family. We first examined the moderating role of *prior-day* deviant behavior toward the supervisor, finding that the interaction term of anger and prior-day deviant behavior toward the supervisor was not a significant predictor of deviant behavior toward the family ( $\gamma = 0.054$ ,  $p = 0.19$ ). We then examined the moderating role of *same-day* deviant behavior toward the supervisor, finding that the interaction term of anger and same-day deviant behavior toward the supervisor was not a significant predictor of deviant behavior toward the family ( $\gamma = 0.030$ ,  $p = 0.48$ ) either. We discuss the implications of these findings in “**Discussion**” section.

Finally, due to positive skewness of the measures, we followed the recommendation of a reviewer and Gabriel et al. (2018) by using natural log transformation of all the variables and reexamining our model. We found the same pattern of results. All detailed results of the supplementary analyses are available from the first author.

## Discussion

The present study examines the relationship between daily abusive supervisory behavior and employees’ daily deviant behavior toward their supervisor and how daily anger mediates and previous day’s deviant behavior toward their family moderates this relationship. Using a diary method, we found that anger mediated the relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and deviant behavior toward the supervisor. In addition, we found that prior-day deviant behavior toward one’s family moderated the relationship between anger and deviant behavior toward the supervisor such that the relationship was stronger when deviant behavior toward the family was lower.

## Theoretical Implications

Our study has important implications for the abusive supervision literature. Past research suggests that prior behaviors serve as an important context for subsequent behaviors (Mazar and Zhong 2010). However, the abusive supervision literature has not yet examined this possibility. We found that, after experiencing anger following abusive supervisory treatment, the extent to which employees responded to their supervisors in a deviant manner was conditional upon their deviant behavior toward their family members on the previous day, such that the relationship was weaker when they engaged in higher levels of deviant behavior toward their family. Our results are consistent with moral balance theory, which suggests that prior moral/immoral behavior may serve as a backdrop against which individuals make unethical/ethical choices (West and Zhong 2015). Although people in general do not feel compelled to become a moral saint, they do not want to become a moral sinner either (Nisan 1991). These results are significant because they represent a departure from the extant literature that tends to focus on how stable individual or situational factors may moderate employees’ response to abusive supervision (Martinko et al. 2013). Our results suggest that the way employees respond to abusive supervisory behavior may be episodic. The same employee may react differently to different episodes of abusive supervisory behavior, depending on whether he/she engaged in morally questionable behaviors prior to the abuse.

<sup>4</sup> We thank one anonymous reviewer for suggesting this analysis.

One reviewer suggested an alternative explanation to our finding based on the transactional model of stress that prescribes a two-stage response process to stressors (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy 2005; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). In the primary appraisal stage, individuals determine the personal relevance of the stressor, resulting in emotional reactions toward the stressor in a process similar to that based on AET. In the secondary appraisal stage, individuals deploy coping mechanisms to minimize the negative effects of the stressors. Ashton-James and Ashkanasy (2005) emphasized the role of reappraising the stressor in the secondary appraisal stage as a coping mechanism. The logic based on reappraisal suggests that having engaged in deviant behavior toward one's family (relative to not having this experience) may trigger the reconstrual of the abusive supervisory behavior in light of one's own actions. For example, individuals may develop a different perspective by telling themselves that "what my supervisor did to me today is no worse than what I did to my family member last night" or that "we are only humans and we all make mistakes." Such reappraisal of the *supervisory abusive behavior* may make it more likely that they forgive the abuser and hence modulate their deviant behavior toward the supervisor. The reappraisal logic is different from our moral balance logic, which focuses on how deviant behavior toward the family balances the moral implications associated with *deviant behavior toward the supervisor*, rather than the abusive supervisory behavior itself. We do not have the data to determine which specific process drove our results and this is certainly an important avenue for future research. Attending to this theoretical alternative may not only offer important insights into what precisely motivates individuals to act deviantly against the backdrop of their own deviant behavior toward their family, but also provide practical solutions to reduce tit-for-tat behavior in the work place (e.g., by managing either the perceptions of the abusive supervisory behavior or the moral justifiability of the retaliatory behavior).

Further, our study contributes to AET. Existing research on AET tends to focus on how individuals emotionally react to workplace events. By integrating it with moral balance theory and work-family compensation, we show that what transpired before the affect-inducing event has occurred may shape how individuals act on their emotions. Interestingly, in our supplementary analyses, we found that deviant behavior toward the family did not moderate the relationship between abusive supervisory behavior and anger, only the relationship between anger and deviant behavior toward the supervisor. Thus, experiencing anger does not constitute a moral transgression that may deplete moral credits but acting in a deviant manner does. Peng et al. (2019, p. 411) noted that "the fact that abusive supervision violates an important moral principle may consistently link abusive supervision to feelings of anger." It is possible that individuals

may experience emotions immediately after being abused, but moral balancing act may involve cognitive calculations by taking into consideration one's moral behavioral history.

Our study also has implications for work-family research. Most of the work-family literature views the family "as a distraction from work, a source of interference that weakens performance" (Menges et al. 2017, p. 696). While we did not intend to show that deviant behavior at home may enhance work experience per se, our study is consistent with other researchers who suggest that the lack of fulfillment in one domain can be compensated by the fulfillment in other domains (Hewett et al. 2017). In addition, by integrating work-family compensation with moral balance theory, we offer important insights into *why* work-family experiences buffer each other, thereby allowing us to fill an important void in the literature. Future research should consider other theoretical perspectives that may shed light on the work-family compensation process. For example, self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) may potentially explain why positive family experiences may buffer the negative effects of stressful events in the workplace (Hewett et al. 2017).

Finally, we also contribute to the moral balance literature. Past research tends to focus on the sequential moral behaviors that occur within the same domain (Lin et al. 2016; Miller and Effron 2010). We show in our study that immoral behaviors that occur at home may also have implications for subsequent work behavior. In addition, past research has suggested that people may compensate their immoral behaviors by engaging in moral ones (Zhong et al. 2010). Our study is consistent with Jordan et al. (2011) who suggested that individuals can achieve a desired moral image through different routes, one of which we uncover in the present research is the reduction of deviance as a response to abusive supervisory behavior. It is worth noting that in the alternative models we tested, same-day or previous-day deviant behavior toward the supervisor did not moderate the relationship between anger toward the supervisor and deviant behavior toward the family. One possible explanation is that, as Brown and colleagues suggested (Brown et al. 2011), moral balancing is more likely to occur only when the subsequent behavior can be rationalized. In the alternative models, the subsequent behavior is deviant behavior toward the family, which is less justifiable as a response to abusive supervisory behavior relative to deviant behavior toward the supervisor, because family members are innocent parties whereas the abusive supervisor is the transgressor that deserves to be punished through deviant behavior.

## Practical Implications

Our finding showing that daily abusive supervisory behavior related to employee deviant behavior through anger underscores the importance of minimizing abusive

supervisory behavior or eliminating it altogether. Recent research has shown that a number of different factors shape supervisors' daily abusive behavior such as the amount of sleep they have (Barnes et al. 2015), the family-to-work conflict they experience (Courtright et al. 2016), or the ethical leadership behavior they exhibit on the previous day (Lin et al. 2016). These findings suggest that organizations can implement interventions aimed at reducing the occurrence of abusive behaviors, as opposed to focusing on trying to select individuals who do not have the tendency to engage in these behaviors. To accomplish this aim, organizations need to offer regular (or even daily) feedback to the supervisors solicited anonymously from their direct reports. Past research has linked the depletion of regulatory resources to aggressive behavior (Qin et al. 2018). Thus, daily interventions can focus on ways to replenish supervisory staff's regulatory resources such as offering on-site counseling services, providing regular breaks from work throughout the day, and reducing the amount of disruption after regular business hours.

We also found that anger played an important role in how employees responded to abusive supervisory behavior. Mitchell et al. (2015) noted that though work deviance may seem like a positive response to abuse, it can incur significant cost to the organization. Thus, organizations should increase employees' awareness of how their emotions such as anger may serve as a precursor to questionable workplace conducts. Organizations may offer employees an opportunity to vent their anger as a way to "retaliate" against the abuser. For example, Liang et al. (2018) found that employees reacted less negatively to abusive supervision when they were able to take out their anger on a voodoo doll representing the abusive supervisor. Additional programs to manage anger include anger management classes, mindfulness training, and employee counseling. Organizations may also set up internal reporting systems to allow employees to report incidents of abusive supervisory behavior and pledge to investigate every incident.

In addition, we found that prior-day deviant behavior toward the family reduced the relationship between anger toward the supervisor due to abusive supervisory behavior and deviant behavior toward the supervisor. By no means do we suggest that organizations should encourage employees to engage in deviant behavior toward their family in order to reduce their tendency to act in a deviant way toward their supervisor. Instead, organizations need to be mindful of how employees' family experiences may spill over into their work life. Recent research has shown that offering family support can help employees cope with the stress dealing with the work-family interface (Bagger and Li 2014; Li et al. 2017a, b). Organizations should offer training to their supervisory staff so that they can understand the family needs of their

follower, recognize signs of family difficulties, and offer assistance to address these challenges at home.

## Limitations and Future Research

Our study has several limitations. First, all the study variables came from self-reports which may lead to concerns about common-method bias. However, we temporally separated the key variables in our model with the four variables being reported in three different surveys. We also person-mean centered the variables which past research has shown to be an effective way to reduce common method bias (Gabriel et al. 2019). In addition, common method bias may be less of a concern for moderating analyses (e.g., Lai et al. 2013; Siemsen et al. 2010).

Second, while we focus on how employees react to abusive supervisory behavior toward the self, we do not consider abusive supervisory behavior toward peers. Recent research has suggested that peer abusive supervision may predict emotions that are different from those caused by own abusive supervision, depending on whether the peers are worthy of the abuse, whether one can avoid the same mistreatment befalling the peers, and the comparison of the level of abuse between the self and the peers (Mitchell et al. 2015; Peng et al. 2019; Shao et al. 2018). We suggest that future research consider own and peer abusive supervisory behavior in tandem and examine their emotional implications in the workplace.

Third, while we focus on anger as an emotional response to abusive supervisory behavior, past research has demonstrated other mediators such as reward fulfillment (Lian et al. 2012) and perceived organizational support (Shoss et al. 2013). Future research should control for these alternative explanations in understanding the role of emotions as a response to abusive supervisory behavior.

Finally, as two anonymous reviewers pointed out, Fig. 2 indicates that individuals were least likely to engage in deviant behavior toward the supervisor when they were low on both anger toward the supervisor and deviant behavior toward the family. Following this pattern, if individuals were high on either anger toward the supervisor or deviant behavior toward the family or high on both, their tendency to engage in deviant behavior toward the supervisor would be rather high. Future research should examine how stable characteristics of victims of abusive supervisory behavior may change the relationships we observed. One such characteristic is *trait aggressiveness*—the dispositional tendency to harm others (Bushman 1996). Recent research has shown that trait aggressiveness is associated with hostile intentions and behaviors, suggesting that aggressive individuals are more likely to engage in deviant behavior irrespective of their moral agency (Santos et al. 2019). Another characteristic is *trait negative affect*, which refers to a dispositional



tendency to experience negative moods (Watson 1988). Given that followers' feelings toward their leader account for a substantial portion of the variance in leader evaluations (Martinko et al. 2018), it is likely that employees with higher levels of trait negative affect may react more angrily to abusive supervisory behavior and engage in more deviant behavior toward their supervisor, regardless of their levels of prior deviant behavior toward the family. Future research should explicitly examine these possibilities.

## Conclusion

Our research shows that the extent to which employees responded to their anger due to abusive supervisory behavior with deviance toward the supervisor was conditional upon their prior-day deviant behavior toward their family. Our study advances the abusive supervision literature, suggesting that it is important to take into consideration employees' behavioral history in other life domains when examining how they react to abusive treatment in the workplace.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethics Approval** All procedures performed in the current study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of West Texas A&M University (Title: Leadership, Psychological Contract, Work Deviance, and Sleep. IRB Proposal #: 23-03-17).

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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