



# How to Deal With a Difficult Boss

## The Roles of Leaders' Narcissistic Rivalry and Followers' Behavior in Abusive Supervision Intentions

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**Abstract:** As abusive supervision entails negative outcomes for individuals and organizations, a better understanding of leader- and follower-related antecedents of abusive supervision can help organizations prevent destructive leadership. In an experimental vignette study with 140 leaders, we tested an integrative model that includes leaders' narcissism as an antecedent of their abusive supervision intentions. We also tested for the moderating role of followers' behavior and indirect effects via leaders' evaluations of followers. We employed the narcissistic admiration and rivalry concept (NARC) to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of grandiose narcissism and found that the maladaptive dimension, narcissistic rivalry, predicted abusive supervision intentions. This effect was strongest when followers behaved dominantly. Finally, we found preliminary evidence that leaders' evaluations of followers' likeability, but not of followers' competence, mediated the relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions. These indirect effects were not conditional on followers' behavior. We discuss these findings in light of theoretical and practical implications for individuals and organizations.

**Keywords:** leadership, narcissism, narcissistic admiration and rivalry concept, abusive supervision intentions, followers' behavior

In recent years, interest in research (see Schyns et al., 2019) and public discourse concerning the so-called “dark side” of leadership has increased. Abusive supervision, which describes “the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), is the construct that is typically studied in this context (Tepper et al., 2017). It entails severe negative outcomes for individuals and organizations: In comprehensive meta-analyses, destructive leadership in general (Schyns & Schilling, 2013) and specifically abusive supervision (Mackey et al., 2017) were found to be negatively related to followers' attitudes toward leaders, well-being, job satisfaction, commitment, and performance but positively related to counterproductive work behavior and turnover intentions. Importantly, abusive supervision is widespread in organizations, with prevalence rates ranging from 10% to 30% (e.g., Aasland et al., 2010; Tepper et al., 2017).

Undoubtedly, knowing the antecedents of abusive supervision and the circumstances under which it is likely to occur can improve the implementation of preventive measures and interventions (Schilling & Schyns, 2014). Much research has focused on revealing leader-, follower-, and organization-related antecedents of abusive supervision (e.g., Tepper et al., 2017). For instance, leaders' agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty-humility have shown negative relationships with abusive supervision (Breevaart & de Vries, 2017; Camps et al., 2016; Mawritz et al.,

2014), whereas neuroticism (Eissa & Lester, 2017) and Machiavellianism (Kiazad et al., 2010) have shown positive ones. However, the relevance of leaders' narcissism, which is positively related to leadership emergence (Grijalva et al., 2015), is not yet clear as results have been equivocal (Waldman et al., 2018; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). We aimed to clarify the evidence in three ways. First, we argue that the inconclusive evidence may be due to the fact that previous studies have largely studied narcissism as a unidimensional construct. In contrast, we based our study on the narcissistic admiration and rivalry concept (NARC; Back et al., 2013), which distinguishes between antagonistic and agentic dimensions of narcissism, in an attempt to reveal that these two dimensions may have different relationships with abusive supervision. Second, we aimed to shed light on the mechanisms that may underlie the relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions and, putting theoretical assumptions of the NARC to the test in a leadership context, explored whether the effects can be explained by leaders' devaluation of their followers. Third, we aimed to better understand the role of followers in abusive supervision. From an interactionist perspective, we investigated the role of followers as co-producers of abusive supervision (e.g., Padilla et al., 2007; Shamir, 2007). Whereas several studies have revealed characteristics that make followers more likely to fall victim to abusive supervision (e.g., Mackey et al.,

2017; Martinko et al., 2013), to our knowledge, only one study focused on the interaction between leaders' narcissism and followers' characteristics in the context of abusive supervision (Nevicka et al., 2018). That study took a follower-centric approach and showed that followers with low self-esteem and low core self-evaluations perceived their leaders as more abusive.

The current study aimed to provide insights on leader- and follower-related antecedents of abusive supervision. From a theoretical perspective, distinguishing antagonistic and agentic narcissism dimensions and focusing explicitly on the antagonistic dimension of narcissistic rivalry and the associated cognitive processes can help disentangle previously inconclusive findings on the relation between leaders' narcissism and abusive supervision. In addition, examining how followers' behavior can be a trigger for abusive supervision yields theoretical insights concerning the relative importance of others' behavior in trait expression. Furthermore, knowing whether followers can influence how they are treated by narcissistic leaders can be helpful for organizations that want to avoid or reduce the occurrence of abusive supervision.

## Theoretical Background and Derivation of Hypotheses

### Narcissism and Leadership

Individuals high on grandiose narcissism tend to strive for leadership positions (e.g., Chen, 2016) and often attain them because of their extraverted and dominant behavior (Grijalva et al., 2015). Leaders' narcissism has been suggested as an antecedent of destructive leadership (Krasikova et al., 2013), but results have been inconclusive so far: Whereas some authors found that leaders' narcissism predicted abusive supervision (Waldman et al., 2018; Whitman et al., 2013), others found no such association (Nevicka et al., 2018; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016).

One reason for these inconclusive results might be that previous studies have relied on unidimensional measures of narcissism (e.g., Braun, 2017) and have not tested whether distinct dimensions of narcissism influence outcomes in opposite ways. We aimed to resolve this situation by applying the NARC (Back et al., 2013), which distinguishes between two dimensions. The agentic dimension, narcissistic admiration, is related to positive social outcomes. Individuals scoring high on this dimension tend to use charm and self-presentation to bolster their grandiose self-views. Narcissistic rivalry, the antagonistic dimension, is related to protecting one's grandiose self-view by devaluing and derogating others, resulting in negative social outcomes. For example, Küfner and colleagues (2013) and Leckelt and colleagues (2015) found that people high on narcissistic rivalry were prone to showing aggressive and

competitive behavior (e.g., by insulting others). They are very sensitive to a loss of status and potential threats to their inflated egos (Grapsas et al., 2019), which, according to ego threat theory, should result in aggression as an attempt to restore positive self-views (Baumeister et al., 1996). Thus, we propose that, whereas narcissistic admiration should be unrelated to abusive supervision, leaders high on narcissistic rivalry should show a greater propensity for abusive supervision.

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* Leaders' narcissistic rivalry, but not admiration, is positively associated with abusive supervision intentions.

Typically, studies on abusive supervision measure followers' perceptions of leaders' behavior. In order to complement this follower-centric approach, we focused on leaders' intentions to act abusively. In using this approach, we followed Schyns and colleagues' (2018) recommendation to avoid relying on followers' potentially biased perceptions of leaders. As abusive behavior is difficult to observe in everyday contexts due to its low base rates, reactivity, and social desirability, we relied on behavioral intentions as predictors of behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

### Underlying Mechanisms – Leaders' (D)Evaluations of Followers

As a second research question, we focused on the mechanisms underlying the expected positive relationship between narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions. Narcissists generally see themselves as superior to others and engage in downward comparisons (Krizan & Bushman, 2011). Grapsas and colleagues (2019) argue that this belief in one's superiority is inevitably linked to the belief that others are inferior (see also Schütz, 2001). According to the NARC (Back et al., 2013), people high on narcissistic rivalry devalue and derogate others to support a grandiose self-view, and this is related to aggressive behavior. In the same vein, Keller Hansbrough and Jones (2014) proposed that narcissistic leaders evaluate followers as incompetent and less valuable as a way to justify their abusive behaviors. Indeed, it has been shown that hostile cognitions increase the likelihood that leaders will treat their followers badly (Garcia et al., 2014) and that implicit followership theories predict the quality of relationships between leaders and followers (Sy, 2010). Hence, we expected that the relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions would at least partially be due to leaders' devaluation of their subordinates. To disentangle whether negative evaluations occur at both an interpersonal and a professional level, we looked at leaders' evaluations of followers' likeability and competence separately (e.g., Abele et al., 2021). This led us to propose:

*Hypothesis 2a (H2a):* Leaders' evaluations of followers' likeability mediate the relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions.

*Hypothesis 2b (H2b):* Leaders' evaluations of followers' competence mediate the relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions.

### The Moderating Role of Followers' Behavior

As outlined in the introduction, leaders' behavior is determined not only by their own personality but also by their subordinates' characteristics and behaviors (e.g., Shamir, 2007). In line with extant research (e.g., May et al., 2014), we presume that followers actively contribute to abusive supervision. Specifically, we expect that apart from generally devaluing others, leaders high on narcissistic rivalry are especially reactive to followers who threaten their status. We base this assumption on ego threat theory, which posits that aggression directed toward the source of an ego threat can be used to rebuild one's positive self-view (Baumeister et al., 1996). In line with this reasoning, studies have found that when narcissists receive negative feedback from others, they perceive the evaluators as less competent and less likeable (Kernis & Sun, 1994). Similarly, the NARC posits that the self-defensive strategies typical of narcissistic rivalry are triggered by self-esteem threats (Back et al., 2013). Due to their fragile self-esteem, individuals high on narcissistic rivalry can be expected to be extremely sensitive to potential ego threats (e.g., Geukes et al., 2017). The tendency to devalue others should be strongest when others behave dominantly, as followers who openly confront their supervisors and behave in a dominant fashion should be perceived as a challenge to their leaders' status and authority (Grapsas et al., 2019). Hence, we propose that leaders high on narcissistic rivalry should be particularly likely to devalue their followers, especially when a follower behaves in a dominant fashion and thus threatens the leader's status.

*Hypothesis 3 (H3):* Followers' behavior moderates the negative relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and their evaluations of followers such that the relationship is stronger when followers behave dominantly than when they behave submissively or constructively.

According to ego threat theory, not only do individuals high on narcissism devalue others who threaten their status, but they also tend to direct aggression toward the source of negative feedback (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Thus, we propose that the indirect effects of leaders' narcissistic rivalry on abusive supervision intentions via leaders' evalu-

ations of followers' likeability and competence should be strongest when followers behave dominantly, as such behavior should trigger ego threat in leaders and thus spark efforts to restore their grandiose self-views by devaluing and mistreating the source of the threat. Integrating H2a/H2b and H3, we propose a moderated mediation hypothesis (Edwards & Lambert, 2007):

*Hypothesis 4 (H4):* The indirect effect of leaders' narcissistic rivalry on abusive supervision intentions via leaders' evaluations of followers is conditional on followers' behavior such that it is strongest when followers behave dominantly.

The theoretical model of our research is depicted in Figure 1.

## Method

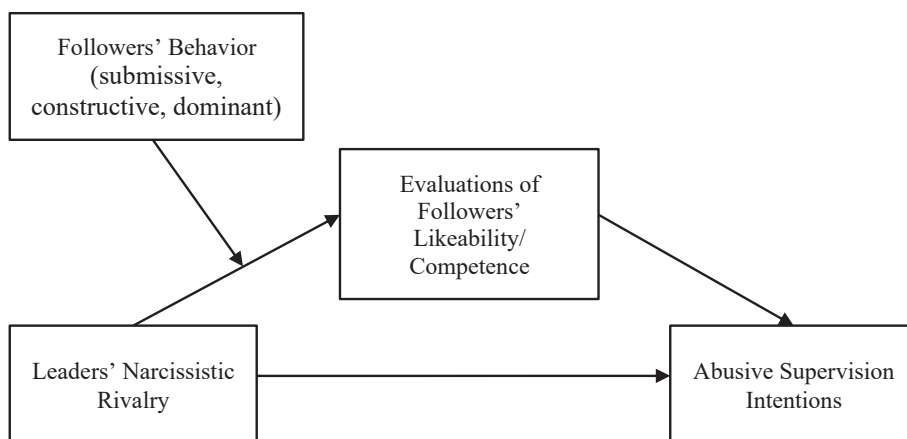
### Sample and Procedure

We conducted our study in a real-life sample of German leaders from different fields. We contacted participants via the quarterly newsletter of the authors' competence center, the university's press department, personal contacts, and online platforms. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidential treatment of data were ensured. At the beginning of the survey, participants indicated their position in the hierarchy (low/medium/high leadership position), specified how many followers they had, and answered demographic questions. Then, they completed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire and afterwards read the experimental vignettes described below. The initial sample consisted of 141 leaders, one of whom was excluded due to missing data. Our final sample consisted of 140 participants (35% women). Participants were between 24 and 63 years old ( $M = 45.74$ ,  $SD = 10.46$ ) and came from nine industries, with public services being the most frequent (21%). Leaders directly supervised between 1 and 200 followers ( $M = 15.04$ ,  $SD = 25.98$ ).

Heeding calls for more transparency in psychological research, the theoretical model and the main hypotheses were preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF; see <https://osf.io/q4ahw/>). We also preregistered other variables and hypotheses that are reported in a separate manuscript (Fehn & Schütz, 2020).

### Experimental Manipulation

We employed an experimental vignette design and manipulated followers' behavior to portray submissive, constructive, and dominant behavior (see H3). We followed



**Figure 1.** Proposed theoretical model

Aguinis and Bradley's (2014) recommendations in designing three experimental vignettes. The detailed development process and the full text of the vignettes can be found in the Electronic Supplementary Material, ESM 1.

We used a within-subjects design (i.e., each participant read all three vignettes in a randomized order; Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Participants were asked to imagine that a follower showed the described behavior in the given situation (e.g., apologizing for a mistake vs. blaming the leader for it). Then, they rated the follower's behavior on dominance and submissiveness (manipulation check) and indicated how likeable and competent they thought the follower was on separate 5-point Likert scales. Afterwards, they indicated their abusive supervision intentions toward this follower on the scale described below.

The manipulation checks showed that participants perceived that the vignettes differed as intended: The submissive vignette was rated highest in submissiveness ( $M = 3.86$ ) and lowest in dominance ( $M = 1.10$ ), the dominant vignette was rated lowest in submissiveness ( $M = 1.25$ ) and highest in dominance ( $M = 4.35$ ), and the constructive vignette was in between on both dimensions ( $M_{\text{submissive}} = 1.65$ ;  $M_{\text{dominant}} = 2.63$ ). All differences on dominance,  $F(2, 417) = 468.93, p < .001$ , and submissiveness,  $F(2, 417) = 310.76, p < .001$ , were significant.

## Measures

### Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry

We assessed narcissistic admiration and rivalry with the 18-item German version of the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013). Sample items are "I want my rivals to fail" (*rivalry*) or "I show others how special I am" (*admiration*). Internal consistency was good with Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$  for admiration and  $\alpha = .77$  for rivalry.

### Abusive Supervision Intentions

Abusive supervision intentions were measured with an adapted form of the German version of Tepper's 15-item scale (2000; German version by Schilling & May, 2015). We asked participants how likely they would be to show the described actions. For example, they rated how likely they would be to "ridicule Alex" or "put him/her down in front of others" on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= *very unlikely*) to 5 (= *very likely*). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranged from .80 to .85 in the three experimental conditions.

### Leaders' Evaluations of Followers' Likeability and Competence

To assess leaders' evaluations of followers, we asked participants to indicate how likeable and competent they found the follower described in each respective vignette with one item each on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= *not at all*) to 5 (= *very much*).

### Control Variable

As leaders' intentions and their evaluations of followers could be influenced by negative affect, we controlled for this variable in all analyses. We measured participants' negative affect with the German version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Krohne et al., 1996;  $\alpha = .87$ ), where participants indicated the extent to which they experienced negative affective states (e.g., "nervous" or "upset") on a 5-point Likert scale.

## Results

### Primary Analyses

Data management and preliminary analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 25 (IBM Corp., 2017). Table 1 presents descriptive statistics.



**Table 1.** Means (*M*s), standard deviations (*SD*s), correlations, and internal consistency estimates

| Variable                                 | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1      | 2       | 3       | 4  | 5   | 6     | 7     |
|--|----------|-----------|--------|---------|---------|--|-----|-------|-------|
| 1. Narcissistic rivalry                  | 1.96     | 0.65      | (.77)  |         |         |  |     |       |       |
| 2. Evaluations of followers' likeability | 2.90     | 1.23      | -.07   | –       |         |  |     |       |       |
| 3. Evaluations of followers' competence  | 2.83     | 1.19      | -.08   | .80***  | –       |  |     |       |       |
| 4. Abusive supervision intentions        | 1.27     | 0.39      | .30*** | -.43*** | -.39*** | (.80 <sup>1</sup> /.84 <sup>2</sup> /.85 <sup>3</sup> ) <sup>a</sup> |     |       |       |
| 5. Followers' behavior <sup>a</sup>      | 2.00     | 0.82      | .00    | -.46*** | -.33*** | .32***   | –   |       |       |
| 6. Narcissistic admiration               | 3.16     | 0.75      | .31*** | .02     | -.02    | .04  | .00 | (.83) |       |
| 7. Negative affectivity                  | 1.33     | 0.46      | .17**  | -.04    | -.06    | .22***   | .00 | .04   | (.87) |

Note. *N* = 140. Alpha coefficients are given in parentheses along the diagonal. <sup>a</sup>Categorical variable, dummy-coded: 1 = submissive behavior, 2 = constructive behavior, 3 = dominant behavior. \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.

For hypothesis testing, we used Mplus, version 7.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). Our within-subjects design yielded a hierarchical data structure: We measured the independent and control variables at Level 2 and the dependent and mediator variables at Level 1, as we expected them to vary across the conditions. The moderator was manipulated within-subjects (i.e., on Level 1) and dummy-coded in the analyses with dominant behavior as the reference category. We accounted for the hierarchical data structure using Mplus' *type = complex* analysis strategy, which adjusts the standard errors for the nonindependence of observations.

To test H1, we regressed abusive supervision intentions on leaders' narcissistic rivalry and found a significant effect ( $b = 0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [0.10, 0.24],  $p < .001$ ). Narcissistic admiration did not predict abusive supervision intentions ( $b = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI [-0.08, 0.03],  $p = .371$ ).

To test whether the effect of narcissistic rivalry on abusive supervision intentions was mediated by leaders' evaluations of followers' likeability or competence as predicted in Hypotheses 2a/2b, we tested the indirect effects in a path model (see Table 2) and found a small significant indirect effect of narcissistic rivalry on abusive supervision intentions via leaders' evaluations of followers' likeability that just missed conventional levels of significance ( $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95% CI [0.00, 0.03],  $p = .051$ ). The effect via evaluations of followers' competence was not significant ( $b = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ , 95% CI [-0.00, 0.01],  $p = .181$ ).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, narcissistic rivalry predicted evaluations of likeability ( $b = -0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [-0.29, -0.02],  $p = .028$ ) but not of competence ( $b = -0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [-0.26, 0.01],  $p = .060$ ). Conversely, evaluations of likeability ( $b = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95% CI [-0.14,

$-0.05$ ],  $p < .001$ ), but not of competence predicted abusive supervision intentions ( $b = -0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95% CI [-0.08, 0.01],  $p = .110$ ). Again, narcissistic rivalry predicted abusive supervision intentions ( $b = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [0.08, 0.22],  $p < .001$ ).

In H3, we had predicted that the negative effect from leaders' narcissistic rivalry to their evaluations of followers would be moderated by followers' behavior. However, the interaction between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and followers' behavior did not predict evaluations of followers' likeability ( $b = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI [-0.18, 0.16],  $p = .923$ ) or competence ( $b = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [-0.04, 0.23],  $p = .183$ ).

In order to test whether the presumed indirect effect of narcissistic rivalry on abusive supervision intentions via leaders' evaluations of followers' likeability and competence was conditional on followers' behavior, as predicted in H4, we calculated conditional indirect effects. The indirect effects via evaluations of likeability and competence were not significant in any of the conditions (all  $ps > .15$ ). By contrast, the direct effects of leaders' narcissistic rivalry on abusive supervision intentions were significant in all three conditions (all  $ps < .001$ ).

## Post Hoc Analysis

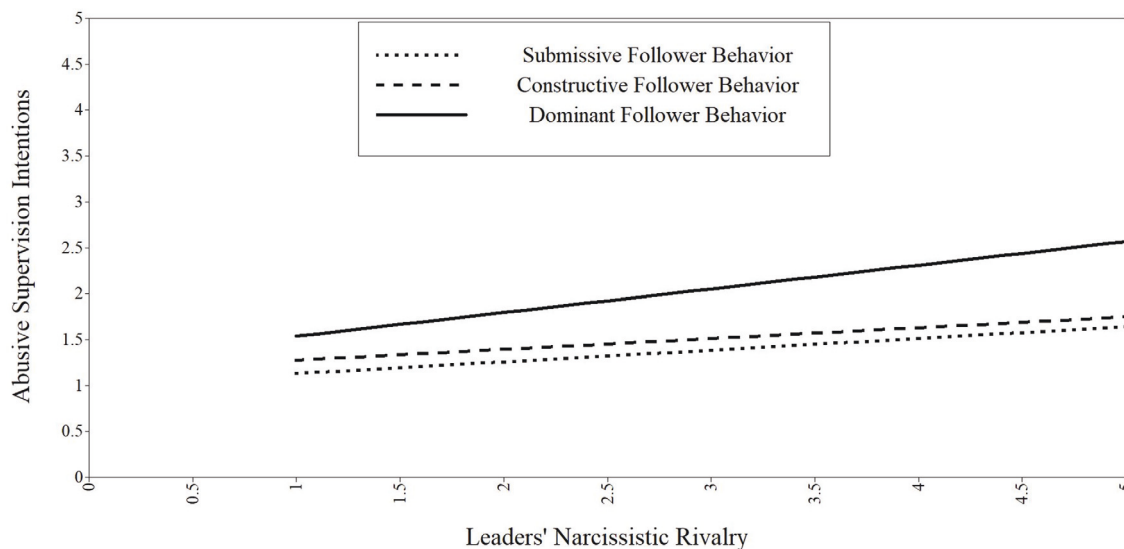
We conducted a post hoc analysis to examine whether the *direct* effect from narcissistic rivalry to abusive supervision was moderated by followers' behavior. As the interaction between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and followers' behavior was significant ( $b = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95% CI [0.02, 0.12],  $p = .011$ ), we examined the relationship for the three conditions by calculating simple slopes. The effect of narcissistic rivalry on abusive supervision intentions was stronger when

<sup>1</sup> This tendency was corroborated by post hoc analyses with only one mediator each: In the model with evaluations of followers' likeability, we found a small significant indirect effect ( $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95% CI [0.00, 0.04],  $p = .028$ ). In the model with evaluations of competence as the mediator, the indirect effect was nonsignificant ( $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95% CI [-0.00, 0.03],  $p = .060$ ). As evaluations of likeability and competence were strongly correlated, we conducted another analysis in which we aggregated these evaluations to form a single mediator. In this analysis, the indirect effect of leaders' narcissistic rivalry on abusive supervision intentions via leaders' overall evaluations of followers was significant ( $b = .02$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95% CI [0.00, 0.04],  $p = .028$ ).

**Table 2.** Results of the mediation analysis

| Variable                              | Evaluations of followers' likeability |           |                | Evaluations of followers' competence |           |               | Abusive supervision intentions |           |                |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|---------------|--------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
|                                       | <i>b</i>                              | <i>SE</i> | 95% CI         | <i>b</i>                             | <i>SE</i> | 95% CI        | <i>b</i>                       | <i>SE</i> | 95% CI         |
| Narcissistic rivalry                  | -0.16*                                | 0.07      | [-0.27, -0.04] | -0.13                                | 0.07      | [-0.24, 0.02] | 0.15***                        | 0.04      | [0.09, 0.21]   |
| Narcissistic admiration               | 0.08                                  | 0.07      | [-0.03, 0.20]  | 0.01                                 | 0.07      | [-0.10, 0.12] | -0.02                          | 0.03      | [-0.06, 0.03]  |
| Evaluations of followers' likeability |                                       |           |                |                                      |           |               | -0.10***                       | 0.02      | [-0.14, -0.06] |
| Evaluations of followers' competence  |                                       |           |                |                                      |           |               | -0.04                          | 0.02      | [-0.07, 0.01]  |
| Negative affectivity                  | -0.08                                 | 0.11      | [-0.25, 0.10]  | -0.12                                | 0.12      | [-0.32, 0.07] | 0.14*                          | 0.05      | [0.05, 0.23]   |

Note. *N* = 140. \**p* < .05; \*\*\**p* < .001.



**Figure 2.** Simple slopes interaction plot showing the relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions in three experimental conditions

followers behaved dominantly ( $b = 0.26$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI [0.14, 0.37],  $p < .001$ ) than when they behaved submissively ( $b = -0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 95% CI [0.03, 0.23],  $p = .011$ ) or constructively ( $b = -0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI [0.03, 0.25],  $p = .012$ ; see Figure 2). The effect did not differ significantly between constructive and submissive behavior ( $b = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.09, 0.07],  $p = .810$ ).

## Discussion

### Key Findings and Theoretical Implications

This study aimed to provide theoretical insights on leader narcissism as a potential antecedent of abusive supervision. Using a two-dimensional conceptualization of narcissism, we were able to disentangle previous inconclusive findings: In line with theoretical assumptions, we showed that narcissistic rivalry is the narcissism dimension that is crucial for leaders' abusive supervision intentions and that narcissistic admiration is unrelated to destructive leader intentions.

Furthermore, we took an interactionist approach and, in line with trait activation theory, asked whether followers could influence how their narcissistic leaders evaluate and treat them. Ego threat theory (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) would suggest that especially dominant followers threaten their supervisors' egos and elicit negative evaluations and that this would result in abusive supervision intentions. The results of our moderated mediation analysis imply that, contrary to our expectations, the cognitive devaluation of followers might not play a crucial role in supervisors' behavioral intentions. However, followers' behavior impacts the *direct* effect of leaders' narcissistic rivalry to abusive supervision intentions: Leaders' narcissistic rivalry was positively related to abusive supervision intentions in all three experimental conditions (i.e., whether followers behaved submissively, constructively, or dominantly). This relationship was strongest when followers behaved dominantly. The finding is in line with our argument concerning the role of threatened egotism in narcissistic self-defense. However, it seems that leaders' narcissistic rivalry is so strongly related to destructive

behavioral tendencies that it partly overrides the effects of followers' behavior.

Contrary to our expectations, leaders' devaluation of followers concerning competence was not a relevant mechanism that explained the relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions. This result differs from Kong's (2015), who found that narcissistic negotiators evaluated their counterparts as incompetent. One explanation may be differences in the measurement of narcissism: Kong (2015) used the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979), which includes a strong preference for agentic aspects (e.g., competence). Narcissistic rivalry, by contrast, is characterized by self-protection and the disregard of communal or interpersonal aspects. Thus, for individuals high on narcissistic rivalry, likeability may be the typical dimension for (d)evaluating others. Furthermore, differences in the samples (undergraduates vs. leaders) and the role of the counterparts in the described scenarios (opponents in negotiations vs. followers) may have played a role. However, we recommend a cautious interpretation of the indirect effects via likeability and competence because the confidence intervals either barely contained zero or just missed containing zero. Methodological aspects discussed in the Limitations section might have been a reason we did not find the predicted mediation effect.

Relating our findings to the theoretical assumptions of the narcissistic leaders and dominance complementarity model (Grijalva & Harms, 2014), our results support the notion that followers' submissive or constructive behavior may work *better* with narcissistic leaders than followers' dominant behavior, but on the basis of our results, one cannot expect any group to have *good* working relationships with leaders who are high on narcissistic rivalry. Indeed, in our study, such leaders reported intentions to behave abusively no matter how their fictional followers behaved. This paints a rather grim picture concerning the framework proposed by May and colleagues (2014), who thought that followers' behavior could mitigate destructive leadership: Our findings suggest that followers' behavior – no matter whether it is submissive, constructive, or dominant – will not prevent leaders from engaging in abusive behavior, even though dominant behavior may make it even worse.

An option for future studies is to test the consequences of active ingratiation as a strategy with narcissistic leaders. For example, Harvey and colleagues (2007) showed that employees who refrained from ingratiation suffered more from abusive supervision than others. Thus, we would expect that when followers provide an ego boost to their narcissistic leaders, this may reduce their leaders' antagonistic tendencies. This reasoning would be in line with the arguments offered by Grapsas and colleagues (2019), who

claimed that self-enhancement is the “default” for narcissists and that they only derogate others when their status is threatened.

## Limitations

The use of an experimental vignette design and a sample of real-life leaders were strengths of our study. Experimental vignettes allow researchers to examine sensitive topics and manipulate relevant variables in a controlled fashion. Using a real-life sample instead of the typical student sample also alleviated threats to external validity (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Steiner et al., 2016). Still, our findings need to be validated in field studies and should be complemented by further data on, for example, time in a leadership position. Future studies should ideally supplement leaders' and followers' reports of followers' behavior and leaders' abusive supervision (intentions) with objective, third-party reports of abuse. This would also alleviate concerns about common method bias, which could also be reduced by separating measures in time in future studies (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Due to obstacles in observing actual abusive behavior in the workplace and our reliance on an experimental vignette design, we measured leaders' intentions rather than followers' reports of leaders' behavior. This poses two challenges: First, whereas intentions are valid predictors of actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991), of course, this approach does not yield conclusive insights into how narcissistic leaders' intentions actually play out in the organizational context and how followers perceive such behavior. However, Martinko and colleagues (2013) questioned the viability of using only followers' perceptions as a proxy for actual leader behavior, and we agree that future studies should incorporate followers' perceptions, leaders' intentions, and actual behavior. Also, self-reports of behavioral intentions may be biased by social desirability. However, in previous studies that used self-reports of abusive supervision, the means did not deviate significantly from followers' reports (Johnson et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2016), thus implying that social desirability might not be an issue in this domain.

Lastly, there might be methodological reasons for why we did not find the expected indirect effects. We used one-item measures of leaders' evaluations of their followers' likeability and competence for pragmatic reasons. We also wanted to capture rather global evaluations (e.g., Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2009) and did not want to overburden participants. However, this approach can impair construct validity. We suggest that future studies use more comprehensive measures of devaluation to examine its role in the rivalry-abusive supervision link.

## Practical Implications

Our findings yield implications for organizations and individuals in several respects. First, concerning the leaders themselves, the positive relationship between leaders' narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions suggests that organizations should not hire or promote leaders who are high on this trait. Keeping in mind that narcissists easily acquire leadership positions due to the overlap of their behavior with what is considered "leader-like" (De Hoogh et al., 2015), selection and promotion processes need to be adapted. Decisions should be based on objective, performance-based criteria or on results from conditional reasoning tests, which could limit the influence of self-presentational strategies (LeBreton et al., 2007). Furthermore, it may also be helpful to use selection strategies that focus on desirable leader traits that typically do not coincide with narcissistic rivalry (e.g., integrity or empathy; Back et al., 2013; Rogoza et al., 2016; Wetzel et al., 2016).

Once individuals high on narcissistic rivalry have acquired leadership positions, our findings suggest that organizations should try to prevent these leaders' negative cognitions about followers' likeability from translating into abusive behavior. Considering that narcissists rarely see reasons for changing their ways (Brunell & Campbell, 2011), such preventative strategies will be challenging. We propose that organizations explicitly sanction destructive leadership and endorse positive (i.e., supportive and respectful) leadership, thus conveying the idea that in order to get ahead in the organization, one also needs to establish positive relationships with subordinates. If narcissistic leaders realize that treating their followers damages their own status (Grapsas et al., 2019), they might be more inclined to at least not act out their abusive tendencies. Organizations could thus counteract abusive supervision by adapting performance ratings and providing training opportunities that foster supportive leadership (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2018).

Second, concerning the influence of followers on destructive leadership, our findings paint a rather grim picture as they imply that followers cannot do much to influence how leaders high on narcissistic rivalry treat them. Apart from the suggestions we made above regarding ingratiation as a possible strategy for stroking a leader's ego and thus being spared abusive supervision, we suggest that followers who are suffering under their leaders should activate additional resources that alleviate the negative effects of abusive supervision, such as peer support (e.g., Hobman et al., 2009).

Third, organizations should try to create an environment that convincingly establishes employee well-being, mutual respect, and trust as core values, instead of promoting a getting-ahead-at-all-costs mentality. Effective complaint sys-

tems and disciplinary procedures have to be in place, and employees should be encouraged to use these without fear of reprisal (e.g., Schyns et al., 2022).

## Conclusion

We showed that leaders' narcissistic rivalry, but not admiration, was positively related to their abusive supervision intentions. This relationship was strongest when followers in our experimental vignettes behaved dominantly, but it did not disappear when they behaved submissively or constructively. We found preliminary evidence that leaders' negative evaluations of followers' likeability, but not their competence, mediated the relationship between narcissistic rivalry and abusive supervision intentions; however, the indirect effects were not conditional on followers' behavior. We suggest that our findings be further validated in field studies and that active ingratiation be included as an additional strategy that followers might use to cope with narcissistic leaders. Organizations should (a) use objective criteria for leader selection and promotion in order to prevent people high on narcissistic rivalry from acquiring leadership positions, (b) sanction destructive and promote positive leadership, and (c) empower employees to make use of support structures.

## Electronic Supplementary Material

The electronic supplementary material is available with the online version of the article at <https://doi.org/10.1027/2151-2604/a000503>

**ESM 1.** Development and Content of Experimental Vignettes: The document contains a detailed description of the development of the experimental vignettes and the full text of the vignettes.

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