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## Introduction to Current Empirical Research

# How research setting and self-esteem impact subordinate behavior

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In “When Research Setting is Important: The Influence of Subordinate Self-Esteem on Reactions to Abusive Supervision,” James P. Burton, Jenny M. Hoobler, and Mary Kernan demonstrate that the way we go about gathering research data can have a powerful effect on the conclusions we draw from it. Specifically, the authors investigate the relationship between self-esteem and reaction to abusive supervision. Citing conflicting previous research, the authors lay out two convincing arguments: that individuals with low self-esteem are most apt to act aggressively under abusive supervision because they feel that their self-image is at risk, and that individuals with high self-esteem are most apt to act aggressively under the same circumstances in order to maintain their own favorable self-view. The solution to this contradiction, the authors propose, lies in the setting in which individuals’ reactions are measured.

Butler, Hoobler and Kernan base their hypotheses on research by LaPiere (1938), who suggested that reactions to hypothetical situations are different from reactions to real situations. They argue that when faced with a hypothetical situation of abusive supervision, individuals with high self-esteem are more likely than those with low self-esteem to respond aggressively in an effort to maintain their positive self-view (self-consistency). On the other hand, they predict that in field settings in which participants are reporting what they actually do, individuals with low self-esteem are more likely than those with high self-esteem to act aggressively in an effort to restore some positive feelings of self-worth (self-enhancement).

The authors’ findings support their hypotheses, indicating that research setting matters in the investigation of self-esteem and aggressive reactions to abusive supervision. Butler and colleagues discuss the ramifications of their findings for researchers and managers. Their study emphasizes the importance of carefully considering the implications of research settings.

### Reference

LaPiere, R.T. (1938). The sociological significance of measurable attitudes. *American Sociological Review*, 3: 175–182.