ABSTRACT. Although much theoretical and empirical research has examined organizational power, virtually none has addressed the hierarchical abuse of power in organizations. Managers’ incentives and discretion and subordinates’ dependencies define the abuse of power as an important organizational issue. This paper offers a conceptualization and process model to help further theoretical and applied understanding, and it considers the ethical nature of power abuse. Two dimensions, disrespect for individual dignity and interference with job performance or deserved rewards, conceptualize the interpersonal abuse of power. Behavioral examples of each dimension are provided.

The process model delineates powerholders’ motives to abuse power and indicates individual attributes that increase the probability of their pursuing these motives. Organizational conditions that allow or encourage the abuse of power and managers’ particular sources of power interact with these motives and attributes to define decisions about abusing power. Norms and considerations of risk influence these decisions. The decision to abuse power leads to the enactment of power strategies, and they generate intended and unintended outcomes. The process model presented here recognizes an emotional component of the hierarchical abuse of power.

Power is necessary and problematic in organizations. Defined as the ability to get things done the way one wants them to be done (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977), power in organizations lacks precise boundaries yet carries pervasive importance. Organizational power requires responsibility because of opportunities for abuse, e.g. arbitrary personnel actions or demands for personal service. Lord Acton’s assertion that power tends to corrupt (1979) suggests that individuals possess incentives to abuse it.

Much organization research has addressed power, but that research has not incorporated the hierarchical, interpersonal abuse of power. The issue has received some popular attention (Goleman, 1986; Terkel, 1972), but advances in organizational knowledge require research into the hierarchical abuse of power. In organizations managers can abuse organizational members or the organization itself through power. The present focus is on the hierarchical, interpersonal abuse of organizational members, specifically on managers’ abusive exercises of power with subordinates, and not on the personal use of an organization’s other resources for private purposes.

The purposes of this paper are to conceptualize the hierarchical, interpersonal abuse of power, to model the process of the abusive exercise of power, and to address directly the ethics of the abuse of power in work organizations. No assumptions about the pervasiveness of power abuse or the desirability of equalizing power in organizations underlie this consideration. Rather, the intent is to contribute to an understanding of an important organizational and social issue through initial conceptualization and theory. The paper conceptualizes the hierarchical abuse of power dimensionally and discusses
pertinent level of analysis issues, develops a process model incorporating individual characteristics, situational conditions, strategic decisions and outcomes, and applies ethical criteria to the abuse of power in work organizations.

Opportunities for the abuse of power

The exercise of power in organizations occurs frequently and diversely. Through formal authority, cultural norms, technical expertise, and organizational politics, individuals with power attempt to influence others (Mintzberg, 1983). However most instances of the exercise of power involve hierarchical authority directly or contextually. While recent organizational restructurings and advances in information technology may have altered some organizations’ hierarchies (Zuboff, 1988), the continued prevalence of these structures, with their considerable potential for abuse, defines a need for attention to the hierarchical abuse of power.

Individuals in organizations possess incentives to abuse power because of its importance in affecting action and acquiring rewards, its status as a valued resource, and its provision of autonomy. Power represents the currency in organizations that allows individuals and groups to gratify needs and attain goals. In addition institutionalized forms of power constitute a primary source of privilege and prestige in a democratic society. Kipnis (1972) has delineated the temptations powerholders confront to manipulate the less powerful. Due to hierarchical authority, resource control, and network centrality (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984), managers have considerable opportunity to abuse power. Because of few perceived financial benefits versus costs of comprehensively controlling managerial discretion, organizations trust managers with considerable autonomy in the exercise of power. The use of power within economic organizations remains a private issue in a capitalistic democratic society such as the United States (Nord, 1978).

Two aspects of power that make managers vulnerable to abusing it are its relational nature and its possible nonrational use. With regard to the relational nature of power, dependency characterizes longitudinal, hierarchical relationships in work organizations (Kotter, 1985). The dependency facet of these exchange relationships makes the possible abuse of power a potentially continual problem in organizations where hierarchical relationships mean subordinates depend on superiors for important rewards without recourse to other sources (Emerson, 1962).

The organizationally rational application of power can harm subordinates, but the nonrational use of power heightens the likelihood of abuse. Power in organizations is context specific according to Pfeffer (1981), and organizations are contexts of manifest and latent conflicts. Often conduct of these conflicts becomes political or emotional, such that power can be used for organizationally nonrational conflict behavior.

Conceptualization of the hierarchical abuse of power

Ultimately the organizational rationale for the interpersonal exercise of power lies in functional effects for job performance (Allen and Porter, 1983). Power exists in organizations to facilitate proficient, coordinated task performance, and this power and performance relationship is often realized through rewards. However organizations are not pure meritocratic entities, and managers can affect subordinate performance adversely as well as positively.

In addition, a powerholder’s interpersonal exercise of power can result, inadvertently or purposefully, in changes in the subordinate’s felt respect and dignity. This is analogous to leadership practices generating unplanned attitudinal outcomes (House and Baetz, 1979). Nord (1978) has discussed the relationship between dignity and power in organizations, and Kipnis (1972) has described the lessening of respect for subordinates that many powerholders experience. Similarly, Lukes (1986) asserted that powerholders’ desires and beliefs affect others’ well-being.

Thus two premises about the exercise of power underlie the conceptualization of the hierarchical abuse of power developed here: (1) A powerholder’s exercise of power can increase