

The Effect of Abusive Supervision on Employee Workplace Deviance: The Parallel Mediating Effect of Organizational Commitment and Job Stress

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Abstract: This study explores the mechanism of influence between abusive supervision and employee workplace deviance in the Chinese organizational context. We assessed the mediating role of organizational commitment and job stress in this relationship. We tested the hypotheses with data from 621 employees from China and found that: (a) abusive supervision positively predicted employee workplace deviance; (b) organizational commitment mediates the link between abusive supervision and workplace deviance; (c) job stress also mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance. Our findings indicate that abuse by supervisors can result in workplace deviance of subordinates by reducing employee commitment and increasing employee stress. In conclusion, we summarize the theoretical and practical contributions and discuss potential directions for future research.

1. Introduction

In the era of economic globalization, inter-organizational competition has intensified, and the prevalence of workplace deviance not only poses significant financial risks to organizations but also undermines internal stability and unity, thereby weakening organizational competitiveness[1]. It encompasses interpersonal deviance, such as ridicule, violence, gossip, and theft among organizational members, as well as organizationally-directed deviance, including deliberately slowing work pace, damaging company property, or leaking confidential information.[2]. Given the harm caused by workplace deviance, it is of great practical significance to gain a deeper understanding of the causes of such behavior. Previous research suggests that abusive supervision is considered a key driver of employee workplace deviance[3]. Abusive supervision, defined as sustained nonphysical hostility (e.g., verbal aggression or belittling) by a manager towards subordinates, has significant negative effects on employees' mental well-being, work satisfaction, commitment, and performance[4]. The characteristics of China society, such as high power distance, highly centralized collectivism, and bureaucracy and hierarchy, maybe the cultural background for the existence of abusive supervision[5]. Therefore, it is more meaningful to study the influence mechanism of abusive

supervision on employees' workplace deviance in the Chinese organizational context.

So far, most studies have used a single psychological factor to explore the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance, such as moral identification, emotional exhaustion, and core self-evaluation[3,6,7]. Few studies considering the role of two psychological factors in this relationship. Organizational commitment has been repeatedly recognized as an important factor in determining the work behavior of employees in organization[8]. Likewise, job stress is closely related to employee performance and behaviour[9]. According to Affective Events (AET) Theory, abusive supervision is a typical negative emotional event that triggers negative emotions and psychological reactions in employees[10]. These negative emotions can influence employees' attitudes toward their work, including their organizational commitment and subsequent behaviors. Resource Conservation (COR) Theory focuses on individuals striving to obtain, protect, and preserve resources that are essential for their well-being[11]. When employees experience abusive supervision, it leads to resource loss, which triggers stress and, ultimately, workplace deviance as a coping mechanism. Therefore, we investigated the impact of abusive supervision on workplace deviance, with organizational commitment and job stress as mediating factors. Our research model is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Hypothesized model.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Abusive supervision and workplace deviance

The relationship between supervisor aggression (e.g., abusive supervision) and workplace deviance has been extensively explored in the literature[12]. A meta-analysis on abusive supervision found that workplace deviance is a significant outcome variable of abusive supervision[13]. According to AET theory, abusive supervisory behaviors, including verbal insults, ridicule, public humiliation, excessive criticism, and the neglect of employees' contributions, are likely to elicit negative emotional responses such as anger, dissatisfaction, and frustration in employees, thereby prompting them to engage in deviant behaviors[10]. Social Exchange theory posits that a reciprocal exchange relationship exists between employees and supervisors. Abusive behavior by supervisors may disrupt this relationship, leading employees to engage in deviant behaviors as a form of retaliation or to seek psychological compensation. Previous research demonstrates that abusive supervision is positively correlated with workplace deviance, and this relationship is more pronounced for employees with stronger negative reciprocity beliefs[14]. Frustration-Aggression Theory suggests that when individuals encounter obstacles in pursuing their goals, they experience anger or frustration[15]. This emotional response often leads to aggressive behaviour[16]. Abusive supervision disrupts employees' needs and expectations, resulting in dissatisfaction and frustration. These negative emotions can motivate employees to engage in workplace deviance. Therefore, we propose: H1: Abusive supervision is positively related to workplace deviance.

2.2 The mediating role of organizational commitment

Organizational commitment refers to the emotional bond, sense of identification, and intention to persist within an organization[17]. Empirical research indicates that abusive supervision has negative impacts on subordinate organizational commitment, while organizational commitment is a crucial determinant of employee behavior, turnover intentions, and job performance[18,19]. From the perspective of AET theory, abusive supervision impacts employees' emotions and attitudes, which in turn influence their behaviors. Specifically, abusive supervision weakens organizational commitment, leading to a decline in employees' loyalty and sense of responsibility toward the organization. Employees with lower organizational commitment are more likely to exhibit negative behaviors, such as deliberately reducing work efficiency, disregarding organizational rules, and even engaging in deviant behaviors as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with the organization or their supervisor. Therefore, we propose: H2a: Abusive supervision is negatively related to organizational commitment. H2b: organizational commitment is negatively related to workplace deviance. H2c: The relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance is mediated by organizational commitment.

2.3 The mediating role of job stress

Job stress is defined as an emotional reaction to stressors that can lead to negative psychological or physiological outcomes[20]. The present study revealed that abusive supervision increases the occupational stress of nursing staff[21]. In the context of abusive supervision, the supervisor's unfair or hostile behavior disrupts in the social exchange, causing employees to feel ignored, devalued, or emotionally hurt. According to SET Theory, this unfair exchange leads to emotional reactions, triggering stress, frustration, and anger. Over time, the accumulated stress may compel employees to engage in workplace deviance as a coping mechanism or form of "retaliation" for the perceived injustice. The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model posits that an imbalance between the effort exerted at work and the appropriate rewards received leads to stressful experiences. Rewards are defined as monetary compensation, respect, career opportunities, and job security, while effort is considered to encompass both intrinsic effort and external pressures[22]. The ERI model asserts that employees experience stress when they perceive that their work effort is not adequately compensated by rewards, such as recognition, respect, career advancement, or job security. Abusive supervision exacerbates this imbalance. As the imbalance between effort and reward intensifies, employees experience increasing levels of stress, which may lead to deviant behavior. Research has shown negative affect related to work mediates the link between supervisor abuse and workplace deviance[23]. Therefore, we propose: H3a: Abusive supervision is positively related to job stress. H3b: job stress is positively related to workplace deviance. H3c: The relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance is mediated by job stress.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from full-time employees of five private enterprises in China. 700 survey instruments were distributed to employees and responses were received from 621 subordinates (88.7% response rate). Among the respondents, 47% are male and 53% are female. In terms of age, 1.6% are under 20, 56.2% are between 20 and 30, 22.2% are between 31 and 40, 14.5% are between 41 and 50, and 5.5% are 50 or older. Regarding education, 53.9% have an undergraduate degree. All participants provided verbal informed consent.

3.2 Measures

Abusive supervision was administered using a 15-item scale developed by Tepper[4].The Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was 0.932. Organizational commitment was measured using a 6-item scale developed by Chen Yongxia[24]. The Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was 0.840. Job stress was measured using an 11-item scale developed by Ma Jianhong[25]. The Cronbach's Alpha of this scale in this study was 0.929. Workplace deviance was measured on a scale developed by Bennett and Robinson with 18 items[2]. The Cronbach's Alpha of this scale was 0.959. Gender, age, education, and years of experience are likely to have an impact on workplace deviance, so the above variables were controlled. All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree"(5).

3.3 Data analysis

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis using Amos 24.0 to assess the construct validity of the four key constructs involved in the research. Common method bias, descriptive statistics, and correlation analysis were performed using SPSS 26.0. To test the hypotheses, we utilized Amos 24.0 for structural equation model (SEM).

4. Results

4.1 Common method bias test

Since all the data in this study came from employees, to avoid the impact of common method bias on the results, the common method bias test was first performed using Harman's single-factor test. The results indicate that the first factor can explain 28.758% of the variation, which is below the critical value of 40% and is within the acceptable range. This shows that the model was not significantly improved. In summary, there is no serious common method bias problem in this study.

4.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

To verify the discriminant validity among the variables of the model constructed in this paper, Amos 24.0 was used to carry out the validation factor analysis of the four-factor model, the three-factor model, the two-factor model, and the one-factor model. Considering that the four latent variables contain 50 items, to streamline structural models and mitigate issues arising from excessive indicators, we utilized the Factorial algorithm to create item parcels[26]. The result is shown in Table 1. It was found that the indicators of the four-factor model ($\chi^2/df=2.391$, CFI =0.987, TLI =0.983, GFI=0.966, AGFI=0.948, RMSEA =0.047, SRMR=0.031) met the basic requirements of the model fit and were significantly better than those of the other factorial models, which suggests that abusive supervision, organizational commitment, job stress and workplace deviance have significant discriminant validity.

Table 1: The result of confirmatory factor analysis.

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Four-factor model(AS,OC,JS,WD)	141.043	59	2.391	0.987	0.983	0.047	0.031
three-factor model(AS,OC,JS+WD)	1030.977	62	16.629	0.845	0.804	0.159	0.144
three-factor	1098.841	62	17.723	0.834	0.791	0.164	0.134

model(AS,JS,OC+WD)							
three-factor model(JS,OC,AS+WD)	1618.189	62	26.100	0.750	0.686	0.201	0.160
two-factor model(OC,AS+JS+WD)	2443.606	64	38.181	0.618	0.535	0.245	0.195
one-factor model(AS+OC+JS+WD)	3348.369	65	51.513	0.473	0.368	0.285	0.229

Note: N = 621. AS, abusive supervision; OC, organizational commitment; JS, job stress; WD, workplace deviance; the same as below.

4.3 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables. As shown in Table 2, there is a significant positive correlation between abusive supervision and workplace deviance ($r=0.307$, $p<0.01$), abusive supervision and job stress ($r=0.387$, $p<0.01$), job stress and workplace deviance ($r=0.250$, $p<0.01$), significant negative correlation between abusive supervision and organizational commitment ($r=-0.307$, $p<0.01$), organizational commitment and workplace deviance ($r = -0.313$, $p < 0.01$). The results of the above analysis laid the initial foundation for the next hypothesis testing.

Table 2: Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.gender	1.530	0.500	1							
2.age	2.660	0.936	-0.049	1						
3. years of experience	3.460	1.717	-0.088*	0.828**	1					
4. education level	2.540	0.787	-0.068	-0.371**	-0.353**	1				
5. AS	1.825	0.743	-0.090*	0.024	0.100**	0.021	1			
6.WD	1.376	0.605	-0.159**	-0.066	-0.047	0.045	0.307**	1		
7.OC	3.556	0.791	0.026	0.037	0.045	-0.009	-0.307**	-0.313**	1	
8. JS	2.686	0.837	0.014	-0.117**	-0.066	0.105**	0.387**	0.250**	-0.253**	1

Note. N = 621. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

4.4. Hypotheses testing

Structural equation model was used to verify the hypotheses of this stud. Under the condition of controlling variables, the model fits the data well ($\chi^2/df=3.733$, CFI=0.958, TLI=0.949, RMSEA=0.066, and SRMR=0.069). The results of path analysis based on structural equation model are shown in Table 3, abusive supervision is positively related to employee workplace deviance ($\beta = 0.173$, $p < 0.001$), and H1 is supported. Abusive supervision was significantly negatively correlated with organizational commitment ($\beta=-0.359$, $p<0.001$) and significantly positively correlated with job stress ($\beta=0.444$, $p<0.001$). H2a and H3a were verified. There is a significant negative correlation between organizational commitment and workplace deviance ($\beta=-0.180$, $p<0.001$), and a significant positive correlation between job stress and workplace deviance ($\beta=0.092$, $p<0.01$), which supports H2b and H3b. Further, the mediating effect of organizational commitment and job stress was tested by applying the Bootstrapping method of self-sampling 5000 times to obtain bias-corrected confidence intervals at the 95% level, and a significant mediating effect was indicated if the 95% confidence interval did not include 0. Bootstrapping results are shown in Table 4. The mediating

effect of organizational commitment on the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance is 0.064, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.044, 0.094]; the mediating effect of job stress on the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance is 0.041, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.012, 0.075], excluding 0; this indicates that the mediating effects are significant, and H2c and H3c are supported. The direct effect of abusive supervision on workplace deviance is 0.173, and the 95% confidence interval is [0.090, 0.265]. The total effect of abusive supervision on workplace deviance is 0.278, and the 95% confidence interval is [0.208, 0.362], excluding 0 from the confidence interval, indicating that the direct effect and the total effect are also significant. Therefore, organizational commitment and job stress partially mediate the effect of abusive supervision on workplace deviance.

Since mediating effects of both organizational commitment and job stress exist, then comparing the magnitude of the two mediating effects would be more useful in guiding managerial practice. The result shows that the difference between the specific mediation effect of organizational commitment and the specific mediation effect of job stress was 0.023, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.016, 0.067], including 0, which indicates that the individual mediated effect of organizational commitment is slightly stronger than the individual mediated effect of job stress, but the difference is not statistically significant (see table 4).

Table 3: Path coefficient of SEM.

Variable 1(X)	Variable 2(Y)	Path Coefficient	Standard Error	p
abusive supervision	organizational commitment	-0.359	0.046	***
Abusive supervision	job stress	0.444	0.046	***
organizational commitment	workplace deviance	-0.180	0.034	***
job stress	workplace deviance	0.092	0.036	**
abusive supervision	workplace deviance	0.173	0.038	***

Note: N=621; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4: Total effect, direct effect, and indirect effect.

				bias-corrected 95% confidence interval.	
path	effect	SE	Z value	lower	upper
indirect effect					
AS→OC→WD	0.064	0.013	4.923	0.044	0.094
AS→JS→WD	0.041	0.016	2.563	0.012	0.075
direct effect					
AS→WD	0.173	0.044	3.932	0.090	0.265
total effect					
AS→WD	0.278	0.039	7.128	0.208	0.362
mediation effect difference	0.023	0.021	1.095	-0.016	0.067

5. Discussion

This study found that abusive supervision is significantly positively correlated with workplace deviance, significantly positively correlated with job stress, and significantly negatively correlated with organizational commitment. Additionally, job stress is significantly positively correlated with workplace deviance, while organizational commitment is significantly negatively correlated with

workplace deviance. Organizational commitment and job stress partially mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance. Specifically, abusive supervision not only directly increases workplace deviance but also indirectly influences it by reducing organizational commitment and increasing job stress. This may be attributed to the fact that the occurrence of aggressive behavior is not solely determined by frustration, but is also influenced by an individual's cognitive appraisal (i.e., how the frustration is interpreted and understood) and emotional regulation (i.e., how anger and stress are managed). Through this study, we contribute to and expand the existing literature by offering new perspectives and insights into this important area of research.

This study provides theoretical insights into the negative impact of abusive supervision on employee deviant behavior and offers practical guidance for managers to adopt more effective management practices. First, organizations should recognize the impact of leadership styles on employee behavior, with particular attention to avoiding the adoption of abusive supervision, a detrimental management approach. Leaders should adopt supportive management styles to enhance employee job satisfaction and emotional engagement, thereby reducing the occurrence of deviant behaviors. Second, organizations must address employees' job stress, particularly in high-pressure work environments, where excessive stress may exacerbate deviant behavior. Furthermore, enhancing organizational commitment among employees is another effective strategy for mitigating workplace deviance. Organizations should strengthen the emotional connection between employees and the organization by cultivating organizational culture, providing career development opportunities, and establishing fair incentive systems, thereby increasing employees' organizational commitment and reducing workplace deviance arising from low commitment.

This study has some limitations. First, abusive supervision and workplace deviance are sensitive issues. Although we used anonymous methods in the questionnaire survey, employees may still conceal or rationalize abusive behavior by their supervisors and their own workplace deviance, which could affect the authenticity of the data. Secondly, the current study design relies on cross-sectional data, which cannot accurately determine the causal relationships between the variables. Further analysis based on longitudinal follow-up surveys is warranted. Thirdly, all the data in this study comes from employees, which may lead to common method bias. Although we have taken precautions against common method bias in the questionnaire design, and the results of the common method bias test show that it is not serious, we cannot completely rule out problems related to common method bias. Therefore, it is necessary to collect sample data from multiple sources.

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