

## The Effect of Perceived Abusive Supervision on Employee Performance: Mediating Role of Employee State Paranoia

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to provide the management of private schools an insight into the complexity of psychological processes induced by abusive supervision hindering the performance of private school teachers. Teachers play an important role in the development of a child in particular and the society in general. With performance dependent on multiple internal and external factors, the internal psychological factors are critical as they serve as the building block of performance. However, in the employment relation scenario, these psychological factors are directly affected by the immediate supervisor's behavior, therefore, implying the necessity to inform management strategies on monitor of supervisory behavior. Accordingly, the sample was selected from private sector schools in Rawalpindi and Islamabad Pakistan. Based on a total of 253 respondents, the results indicated that abusive supervision and employee task and contextual performances were affected by psychological process of paranoia. However, the relationship is more salient at the contextual performance level than at the task performance level. The study also provides implications and possible future directions for further empirical research in relation to contextualization.

**Keywords:** Abusive supervision, employee state paranoia, task performance, contextual performance.

### Introduction

According to contemporary management practices, supervisors play a pivotal role in the well-being of employees, which in-turn, significantly impacts employees' performance (Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013). These modern management philosophy and managerial practices have paid particular attention on the behavioral aspects of supervisors/managers which is a key element in performance as well as the wellbeing of the employees. Such practices in management are generally decentralized in functions however, in the management food-chain concentration of powers tends to evolve at the level of supervisors and managers. This concentration of power in individuals, verges towards placement of employees in a position of vulnerability, both in reality and in perception (Burton & Hoobler, 2006). Empirical findings have associated supervisory abuse with psychological distress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion (Tepper, 2007) as well as reduced organizational commitment, trust, and job satisfaction (Burton & Hoobler, 2006). As a direct consequence of this negative perception, the subordinates may, "Believe that the harm is occurring or going to occur to him or her and the persecutor has the intention to cause harm." (Freeman, 2007). This state of mind, in literature, is known as employee state paranoia or non-clinical paranoia (Chan & McAllister, 2014). Moreover, literature has also highlighted paranoia as, the "Heightened and exaggerated distrust that encompasses an array of beliefs including organizational members' perceptions of being threatened, harmed, persecuted, mistreated, disparaged, and so on by malevolent others within the organization." (Kramer, 2001). An employee's perception of abusive supervision has also been linked with organizational citizenship behavior (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002) as well as reduced employee work performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007).

The social exchange theory, acknowledges that employees perceive negative emotions towards the organization if the supervisor's behavior is abusive towards them (Jiang, Chen, Sun, & Yang, 2017). Employees would behave with their employers in similar fashion as they have been treated by their employers (Gouldner, 1960). Abusive supervision is a phenomenon that represents long lasting emotional and psychological ill-treatments of subordinates by supervisors and has been studied in various contexts, variables and from different theoretical perspectives. In recent conceptual research literature, (Chan & McAllister, 2014) has drawn attention to the relationship between abusive supervision and employee state paranoia in an effort to address the impact of continuous and consistent abuse in supervisor and employee relationship over a period of time.

It is evident from the above discussion that abusive supervision leads to behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. However, research is needed to understand the effect of non-clinical paranoia in employee responses due to abusive supervision with regard to performance. Thus, the present study attempts to contribute to the recent debate of abusive supervision, employee state of paranoia and employee performance.

### **Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

Abusive supervision is a phenomenon that represents long lasting emotional and psychological ill-treatments of supervisors on their subordinates in multiple ways (Ref Missing). Recent studies have highlighted the causes of abusive supervision and its relationship with four categories of antecedents which includes supervisor and organizational related antecedents, and subordinate and demographic related antecedents (Y. Zhang & Bednall, 2016). Abusive supervision has been primarily associated with a diverse range of organizational outcomes such as aggression (Burton & Hoobler, 2011), work place deviance (Chu, 2014) (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), subordinate performance (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011), and organization citizenship (Rafferty & Restubog, 2011)(Chu, 2014).

Spector (2011) has highlighted that many of the environmental, personality and perceptual factors lead to counterproductive work behaviors by interacting with individual's cognitive and emotional capabilities. Likewise, Douglas et al (2008) also highlighted the role of attitudes, emotions and attributes in developing cognition resulting in abusive behaviors. Hence abusive supervisory behavior is also influenced by supervisor's personality characteristics (Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013).

Researchers have highlighted that supervisor's personality characteristics can greatly influence the subordinate's perception regarding abusive supervision (Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011; Wu & Hu, 2009). Similarly (Martinko et al., 2013) have highlighted that peculiarity of individuals at the subordinate level can affect their perception and reactions to abuse at work place. In this vein Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision in perceptual terms as a "Subordinates' perceptions of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior by their supervisor excluding physical aspect of hostility."

Moreover according to (Chan & McAllister, 2014) employee responses to abusive supervision is not just based on supervisor's behavior but also on employee's state of mind. Along with this the thought process of the employee also plays a vital role in determining or deciding if the supervisor's ambiguous actions are abusive in nature and this exaggerated perception of an employee can further affect the employee at his/her affective, cognitive, and behavioral levels (Chan & McAllister, 2014).

Supervisory abuse can be particularly harmful as supervisors typically hold powerful position within the organization in the supervisor and subordinate relationship. This imbalance of power along with abusive supervisory behavior directly causes a sense of threat, anxiety, fear and distrust

(Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Schat & Kelloway, 2000) which, due to their psychological nature, become the components of paranoia as a psychological state. This state of mind, in literature, is known as employee state paranoia or non-clinical paranoia (Chan & McAllister, 2014). Consistent with the prolonged effect of abusive supervision, employee paranoid states are triggered by perceived negative treatment and harmful events (Freeman, Garety, Kuipers, Fowler, & Bebbington, 2002). Moreover these findings are aligned with the findings of (Brodsky, 1976) highlighting that those employees who witness nonphysical harassment at workplace experience more nervousness, hypersensitivity, feeling of threat and suspiciousness and had reported higher levels of paranoid perception than non-harassed employees (Gandolfo, 1995).

Literature highlights that the presence of sustained abusive supervisory behavior, conditions of distrust, fear and anxiety can be associated with the supervisors presence (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009) and over time this sustained state of paranoia takes a life of its own, hence strengthening paranoid thoughts and transforming employees behavior toward their supervisor (Kramer, 2001). According to Aquino & Thau (2009), employees in paranoid state can become hyper vigilant and depend on their own insight (e.g. rumination) to indulge in monitoring information behavior in order to detect future related threats and then pacifying them (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

H1: Abusive supervision will heighten the employee state paranoia.

Existing literature has highlighted the negative relationship of abusive supervision with a number of work related outcomes including extra role performance/organizational citizenship behavior (Zellars et al., 2002). However, studies have also reported that the effect of abusive supervision on in-role performance/task performance (Harris et al., 2007) still requires additional research. Research suggests that abusive supervisory behavior could produce a negative perception among the employees that could result in employee's negative reaction leading to low performance (Kurtessis et al., 2017).

Employee performance has been studied widely through multiple dimensions however, for the present study employee performance has been conceptualized under task and contextual (citizenship) performance. These two facets of performance are the primary focus of this study wherein task performance can be attained by performing job duties, while citizenship (contextual) performance can only be attained if employees are satisfied at their individual level with their organizational and working environment (Poropat, 2002). According to literature, several studies have analyzed performance outcomes of abusive supervision perception and constantly found a negative relationship (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012; Martinko et al., 2013).

As a condition of heightened distrust, paranoia is characterized by an activated psychological state of anxiety and fear of threat (i.e., paranoid arousal) that can only be described as aversive (Freeman, 2007). Freeman (2007) and Kramer (2001), discussed paranoia within organizational context and discussing it as a form of heightened and exaggerated distrust that is composed of employee's beliefs that they are being threatened, harmed persecuted, mistreated, by others within the organization (Kramer, 2001), this belief can in turn effect employees work behavior (Chan & McAllister, 2014) leading to lower performance.

H2: Perceived abusive supervision will influence employee task and contextual performances.

H3: Employee state paranoia mediates the relationship between perceived abusive supervisory behaviors leading to lower employee task and contextual performance.

### Methodology

The present study adopts descriptive research design. The explanatory approach has been adopted to study the causal relationships. The population of the study consists of private school teachers serving in the different private sector schools in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. The education sector comprises of both public and private schools at all levels (primary, secondary and tertiary). However, for the study primary school teachers working in different private schools of Rawalpindi and Islamabad were taken. The total population of the private primary school teachers in Rawalpindi and Islamabad is more than 20,000 (APPSF, 2018). Keeping in view the population, sample was calculated according to Krejcie & Morgan (1970) formula. The sample for the present study comes out to be 379, which is appropriate at 95% confidence interval (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

The data is gathered through self-administered questionnaire. The survey items are adopted from the studies of (Tepper, 2000; Freeman et al., 2005; Tsui & Pearce, 1997). There were 15 items that measured abusive supervision, 18 items measured employee state paranoia and employee performance consisted of 20 items.

Prior to collection of data, school principals and directors were approached and their consent and permission was taken for collection of data while ensuring other ethical considerations. Respondents were given one week to answer the survey forms. Anonymity was ensured to safeguard the identity of the respondents and to make them feel relaxed and safe. The data was collected in two stages. In the first stage the respondents were asked to fill the survey questionnaire based on abusive supervision and employee state paranoia. The data was collected during the month of June 2017. A total of 301 valid questionnaires were returned. The second questionnaire comprising of performance (Task and Contextual) was given to the same respondents during the month of August 2017. A total of 276 valid questionnaires were returned. Cases without complete matched data across the two points were removed. The final sample consisted of 253 private school teachers representing a valid response rate of 66%. Demographically, the majority of the respondents were females (83.5%), 61% were unmarried; the majority were aged 26-30 years (51%) with master degree (72%) and had less than 5 years of experience (58%).

The instrument was in English as the teachers were qualified to read, write and comprehend English language. In order to confirm the reliability, pilot testing of 75 randomly selected teachers was conducted. The Cronbach alpha scores obtained ranged between 0.83 – 0.90 indicating that instrument was reliable. The analysis consisted of hierarchical regression and Pearson correlation was used to test the relationships among the variables.

### Results and Discussion

The measures used in the study were all validated measures, however, they have been used in different contexts. Thus, in the current study context they were required to be validated, which was done through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). During CFA many items were deleted. For example, abusive supervision consisted of 15 items from which items 4-6 and item 10 were deleted. Likewise, 2 items (item 7 and 18) were deleted in employee state paranoia; and for employee performance 4 items (items 6-9) were deleted from contextual performance. The convergent and discriminant validity measured through composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared squared variance (MSV) and average shared squared variance (ASV) were calculated. The values as shown in Table 1 indicate that the constructs were reliable and valid for the current study.

**Table 1. Construct Validity**

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	TP	PAR	ABS	CP
<b>TP</b>	0.976	0.788	0.445	0.977	<b>0.887</b>			
<b>PAR</b>	0.982	0.764	0.316	0.986	0.451	<b>0.874</b>		
<b>ABS</b>	0.977	0.792	0.316	0.977	0.477	0.562	<b>0.890</b>	
<b>CP</b>	0.956	0.812	0.445	0.959	0.667	0.286	0.357	<b>0.901</b>

(TP Task Performance; CP Contextual Performance; PAR Paranoia; ABS Abusive Supervision)

The values of fit indices for model are satisfactory as the indices (CMIN: 2851.472;  $p$ : 0.00, CMIN/Df: 3.339, TLI:  $0.897 > 0.90$ ; CFI:  $0.902 > 0.90$ ; IFI:  $0.903 > 0.90$ ; RMSEA:  $0.084 < 0.05$ ) fulfill the desired criteria for fitness of model (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Table 2 indicates the results pertaining to the direct and indirect effects of abusive supervision with employee task and contextual performances. The direct relationship of abusive supervision with employee task performance ( $\beta$  0.478,  $p < 0.01$ ) was found significant. Similarly, the direct relationship of abusive supervision with employee contextual performance ( $\beta$  0.227,  $p < 0.01$ ) indicates a significant relationship. Thus, hypothesis H2 is supported. Likewise, the direct relationship of abusive supervision with paranoia ( $\beta$  0.562,  $p < 0.00$ ) indicates a significant relationship supporting hypothesis H1.

**Table 2: Model Estimates**

Model	Direct				Indirect				Bootstrap two-tailed sig for mediation ( $p$ )
	Unst. Est.	C.R.	P	St. Est.	Unst. Est.	C.R.	P	St. Est.	
ABS<---Par					0.549	10.689	0.000	0.562	
ABS <---TP	0.507	8.987	0.000	0.478	0.343	5.400	0.000	0.324	0.343 (0.001)
ABS <---CP	0.334	4.069	0.000	0.227	0.229	2.332	0.020	0.156	0.229 (0.010)
Par <--- TP					0.297	4.627	0.000	0.275	
Par <---CP					0.186	1.855	0.064	0.124	

The indirect relationship of abusive supervision with task performance ( $\beta$  0.324,  $p < 0.00$ ) indicates significant effect, however, the effect size has reduced in the presence of employee state paranoia indicating significant mediation. Similarly, the indirect effect of abusive supervision with contextual performance ( $\beta$  0.156,  $p < 0.00$ ) is also significant but the effect size is significantly reduced. In light of the mediation analysis, hypothesis H3 is also supported. The assumption was further verified through bootstrapping and found significant for both task performance (SE 0.343,  $p < 0.01$ ) and contextual performance (SE 0.229,  $p < 0.01$ ) (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). These results indicate that significant mediation of paranoia has occurred in the relationship between abusive supervision and task and contextual performances.

The results of the study are in line with previous studies which point out that abusive supervision lowers employee performance (task and contextual). Studies conducted by (Porath & Erez, 2007) have provided evidence that abusive supervision in terms of rudeness of supervisor lowers employee task performance. Our findings also suggest that abusive supervision has a relatively higher positive effect on employee task performance as compared to contextual performance indicating that abusive supervision increases employee performance, more so in task performance than



contextual performance in line with the finding of (Marcinko, 1997). Majority of the studies linking abusive supervision to employee task performance have found negative relationships between the two variables (Jian, Kwan, Qiu, Liu, & Yim, 2012; Harris et al., 2007). Similarly, study by Wu and Hu (2013) also provides evidence that abusive supervision lowers collective level performance. However, the study conducted by Shao, Li, & Mawritz (2018) provides evidence that abusive supervision has a positive effect on employee task performance; in fact abusive supervision may also enhance employee performance under certain circumstances.

The analysis of the present study demographics indicates that majority of the respondents (58%) were having less than 5 years of experience and having master degrees (72%). These demographics could also explain why abusive supervision may have positive and more enhanced effect on task performance. Employees having less experience are at the start of their career that may push them to show performance even in the face of adversity at their organizations. Thus, if supervisors are abusive towards employees and if employees are having less experience, this could result in employees doing their best to perform and thus, abusive supervision could have positive effects on performance. Furthermore, the economic conditions may be such that employed individuals may prefer not to leave their jobs and stick to it possibly up to the time a better opportunity comes along.

In terms of relationship between abusive supervision and employee contextual performance, the study conducted by (Ahmad, Athar, Azam, Hamstra, & Hanif, 2018) has provided evidence that abusive supervision has a direct negative effect on contextual performance. In case of this study, abusive supervision and contextual performance is positive and when paranoia is introduced, the effect remains positive but the effect size is reduced considerably. This indicates that paranoia acting as mediator increases employee contextual performances as but less saliently than task performance. Though in case of this study the effects are positive but the effect size is reduced. Our findings do suggest that abused employees do exhibit some kind of contextual performance as the results are positive. Previous studies (Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007; Zhang & Liu, 2018) have provided literature evidence that abusive supervision has positive effects. This evidence is in line with the study of Zellars et al (2002) who found that employees despite being abused consider contextual performance such as helping co-workers, positive attitudes at work etc. to be part of their routine job requirements.

In the relationship between abusive supervision and employee task and contextual performance, when paranoia is introduced as a mediator the effect size reduces considerably but remains positive indicating that paranoia does mediate the relationships. Furthermore, paranoia creates distrust and heightened vigilance among employees, which compels employees to remain hyper active in terms of their performances in the organization.

### **Conclusion**

The present study attempted to investigate the relationship between abusive supervision, paranoia, and employee performance in terms of task and contextual performances. The results of the study indicate that abusive supervision and paranoia increases both employee task and contextual performances, however, contextual performance is affected more than the task performance. The results indicate that even in the face of adverse supervisory behavior, employees tend to exhibit positive attitude towards their task performances and consider contextual performance as part of their job requirements. It further implicitly illustrates that employees view their contextual performance as gathering support from their peers and part of their job as well. This relationship, however, needs to be tested as this point has not been tested in our study. Thus, future studies could take co-worker support and power distance as boundary conditions to further study the relationship between abusive supervision and employee performances. It is also possible that the economic and financial condi-

tions of the economy could play a role which could have impacted the decision to either accept or reject the abuse. In developing countries the appropriate existence of labor laws and organizational policies including grievance and redressal mechanisms to provide protection to employees could also be a factor especially when such laws and policies are non-existent and or not implemented. In addition, belief about paranoia of employees is also a factor that may change the relationship of abusive supervision and employee performances. Thus, studying an individual's belief about paranoia may provide useful insights. The study recommends that school authorities should monitor the behavior of supervisors (principals/vice principals/coordinators) that are leading to lower teacher performances. This would help in identification of bottlenecks at supervisory level and would lead to higher teachers' performance beyond the call for duty.

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