

## *Original Paper*

# The Effect of Abusive Supervision on Job Performance: The Role of Leadership Identification and Subordinates' Tradition

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### **Abstract**

*Drawing on the theory of social identity, this study investigated the effect of abusive supervision on job performance intention through a moderate mediation model. The results indicated that: abuse supervision for job performance have significant negative effects, and this relationship is mediated by leadership identification; the mediation effect is further moderated by subordinates' tradition. For subordinates with higher tradition, the mediating effect of abusive supervision on job performance intention through leadership identification is much stronger.*

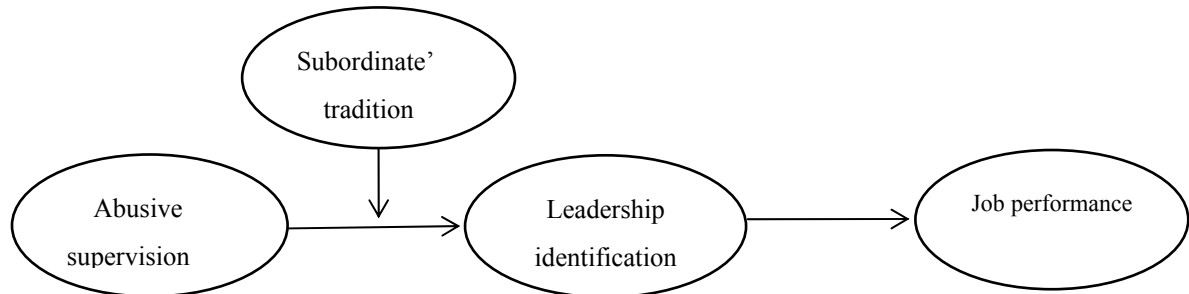
### **Keywords**

*abusive supervision, job performance, leadership identification, Subordinates' tradition*

## **1. Intraduction**

As a negative leadership behavior, abusive supervision is prevalent in all kinds of organizations. Since Tepper was first proposed in 2000, researchers have discussed the mechanism of abusive supervision and the boundary conditions, and have achieved a certain number of results (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007). Studies have shown that supervisors' abusive supervision will affect subordinates' multiple work outcome variables, such as job performance, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, creative behavior and so on (Li, Hua, & Gao, 2013). The negative influence of supervisor's abusive supervision on subordinates' job performance has been confirmed (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007; Wu et al., 2009), but about abusive supervision mechanisms through which affect job performance, and we adopt what kind of measures can effectively control the negative effects of abusive supervision of the research is still insufficient. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the effect of abusive

supervision on job performance, exploring the mediating role of leadership identification and the moderating role of subordinates' tradition drawing on the theory of social identity, and to explore a more comprehensive solution to the abusive supervision. Figure 1 depicts our theoretical framework.



**Figure 1. The Conceptual Model of the Study**

## 2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

### 2.1 Abusive Supervision and Job Performance

Tepper defined abusive supervision as subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors excluding physical contact (2000, p. 178).

Borman and Motowidlo (1997) define job performance as "a work activity that directly states clearly the job task and that the work activity contributes directly or indirectly to the organization's core goals". Previous studies on job performance have shown that job performance is influenced by both organizational context and individual factors. Among them, leadership behavior is one of the most important contextual factors.

Based on resource conservation theory research show that the superior abusive of subordinates will threaten the resources owned by subordinates, which in turn leads to a decrease in performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007). Tepper et al. (2009) based on the social exchange theory, points out that when subordinates are abused by their superiors, subordinates will respond to by reducing the task performance and reducing the behavior within the roles. Based on this argument, the following hypothesis can be offered:

*Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision is negatively related to job performance.*

### 2.2 The Mediating Effect of Leadership Identification

According to the theory of social identity, when employees form an ego concept, they mainly achieve the relationship with the organization or other people in the organization (such as leaders). Leadership identity is a state in which individuals define themselves according to their relationship with leaders (sun, song, & wang, 2013). Leadership identification reflects subordinates' attachment to leaders, and high leader identification increases attachment. Subordinates are more eager to develop and maintain this good relationship with their superiors in their daily work. At the same time, subordinates will also

be motivated by the expectation of this relationship, and more involved work, while doing their job well, will also increase extra role behavior. As a destructive leadership, abusive management will damage the self-esteem of the staff, reduce the trust and job satisfaction of the leaders, which will destroy the relationship between the leaders and subordinates, weaken their identity to the leadership, and eventually lead to the reduction of the task performance and the relationship performance. Based on this argument, the following hypothesis can be offered:

*Hypothesis 2:* Leadership identification mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and Job performance.

### *2.3 The Moderate Effect of Subordinates' Tradition*

Tradition is considered as one of the concepts that best reflects the orientation of Chinese people's personality and values. Tradition refers to: "a set of organized cognitive attitudes, ideas, values, temperamental characteristics, and behavioral wills of individuals in traditional societies" (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). In the organizational relationship, the relationship between leaders and subordinates is not equal. Leaders can exert repressive influence on subordinates and are less subject to relevant regulations. As the subordinates face the abuse management from the superior, they should be unconditional and uncritical of acceptance and obedience. Therefore, under the organizational context of China, employees with different degrees of tradition will react differently when facing the abuse of superiors. In the face of the abuse of leadership, the highly traditional subordinates will endeavor to restrain their emotions and maintain their identification with the leaders. For low-traditional subordinates, they believe that each individual is independent and has equal rights between superior and subordinate. In the face of leadership abuse, it will reduce or terminate its recognition of leadership. Based on this argument, the following hypothesis can be offered:

*Hypothesis 3:* Subordinates' tradition will moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and Leadership identification. The lower the subordinate's tradition, the greater the negative impact of abusive management on leadership identification.

## **3. Method**

### *3.1 Samples and Procedure*

We collected data for this study from 350 employees and their immediate supervisors at a local manufacturer company in xi'an, shaanxi, China. With the assistance of the HR director, we randomly select candidates and their immediate leaders from the company's staff list (each supervisor was matched with five subordinates). We coded the questionnaire in advance and distributed it with the help of human resources department, and to explain the purpose of the research and ensure the confidentiality of responses. Finally, a total of 380 questionnaires were recovered, invalid questionnaires were eliminated, and 311 valid questionnaires remained. The effective recovery rate was 81.8%. Of the 311 subordinates, 58.52% were female.

### 3.2 Measures

The scales used in this study are domestic and international mature scales. All scales were measured on a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

*Abusive supervision.* we was assessed by subordinates using a shortened five-item version of Tepper's (2000) abusive supervision measure developed and validated by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007). *Job performance.* We were assessed by leader using Tsui et al. (1997) six-item scale. *leadership identification.* We was assessed by subordinates using Kark et al. (2003) eight-item scale. *Subordinates' tradition.* We was assessed by subordinates using Farh et al. (1997) five-item scale. *Control variables.* To rule out alternative interpretations, subordinates' gender, age, tenure, education and position level were controlled in regression analyses.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Variables

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations among the study variables. As shown in Table 1, abusive supervision was negatively correlated with job performance ( $r=-0.381$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and Leadership identification ( $r=-0.413$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). In addition, Leadership identification was Positively correlated with job performance ( $r=0.236$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

**Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Inter-Correlations**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender									
2. Tenure	-0.121*								
3. Age	-0.117*	0.643**							
4. Position level	0.246**	-0.196**	-0.247**						
5. Education	0.033	0.127*	0.081	0.076					
6. Abusive Supervision	-0.060	-0.127*	-0.030	-0.013	-0.072	<b>0.931</b>			
7. Subordinates' tradition	-0.185**	-0.078	-0.073	-0.050	-0.032	0.216	<b>0.740</b>		
8. Leadership identification	-0.044	-0.032	-0.022	-0.126*	-0.052	-0.413**	0.263**	<b>0.908</b>	
9. Job Performance	0.122*	0.016	-0.055	-0.035	0.033	-0.381**	0.121*	0.236**	<b>0.893</b>
Mean	1.59	1.16	1.20	3.53	3.05	2.01	2.88	3.36	4.00
SD	0.49	0.52	0.44	0.72	0.60	0.76	0.75	0.87	0.43

Notes. N= 311; \*  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed); \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

Cronbach's alpha appears along the diagonal in bold figures.

#### 4.2 Tests of Hypotheses

According to the method proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), we use SPSS 22.0 software to test hypotheses by hierarchical regression in this study.

In all the models, gender, age, tenure, education level and position level were taken as control variables. Table 2 presents the results of the hierarchical regression, from model 6, we find that abusive supervision is significantly negatively correlated with subordinates' job performance ( $r=-0.398$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). These results support Hypothesis 1. Model 2 shows that abusive supervision is negatively correlated with leadership identification ( $r=-0.436$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Model 8 shows that when the mediate variable of Leadership identification to join, abusive supervision has a significant negative effect on job performance ( $r=-0.289$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), but the negative effect weakened. Therefore, Leadership identification is a partial intermediary effect between abusive supervision and job performance.

These results support Hypothesis 2. Model 4 shows that after controlling the main effects of abusive supervision and subordinates' tradition, the supervision and subordinates' tradition interaction items have a significant effect on leadership identification ( $r=0.130$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), indicating the mediation effect is further moderated by subordinates' tradition. For subordinates with higher tradition, the mediating effect of abusive supervision on job performance intention through leadership identification is much stronger. These results support Hypothesis 3.

**Table 2. Results of Hypothesis Test**

Variables	Leadership identification				Job Performance			
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8
Gender	-0.018	-0.048	0.017	0.008	0.053	0.025	0.056	0.026
Tenure	-0.035	-0.115	-0.104	-0.110	0.046	-0.027	0.052	-0.025
Age	-0.031	0.004	0.032	0.045	0.004	0.037	0.010	0.037
Position-level	-0.133*	-0.137*	-0.126*	-0.110*	-0.045	-0.048	-0.020	-0.045
Education	-0.034	-0.057	-0.057	-0.043	0.028	0.008	0.035	0.009
Abusive supervision		-0.436**	-0.508**	-0.532**		-0.398**		-0.289**
Subordinates' tradition			0.363**	0.371**				
Abusive supervision×subordinates' tradition				0.130**				
Leadership identification							0.189**	0.121**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.021	0.206**	0.326**	0.342**	0.007	0.161**	0.042**	0.165**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.021	0.185**	0.120**	0.016**	0.007	0.154**	0.035**	0.015**
F	1.313	13.139**	20.931**	19.586**	0.450	9.724**	2.243**	8.329**

Note. N= 311; \* p <0.05 (two-tailed); \*\* p <0.01 (two-tailed).

## 5. Discussion

This study finds that abusive supervision can not only directly reduce the performance of subordinates, but also can have a negative impact on performance by reducing the identity of subordinates to leadership. This study further reveals the boundary conditions of abusive management through subordinates' job performance. Previous cross-cultural studies show that Chinese have different characteristics from westerners. Traditional as one of the most can reflect the concept of Chinese value orientation, the results of this study indicate that the Subordinates' tradition has a moderating effect on the relationship between abusive management and leadership identification.

### 5.1 Managerial Implications

The results indicate that abusive supervision has significant negative impact for subordinates job performance. In order to have a good performance, the enterprise can improve from two aspects. On the one hand, enterprises can regularly conduct leadership team training activities to improve the quality of leadership teams, and increase the identification of subordinates for leaders. On the other hand, in the selection of leading team members, the candidates should be strictly controlled in all aspects, so as to minimize the leaders who have the abusive tendency to enter the leadership team.

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