



Abusive supervision and customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior: The roles of hostile attribution bias and work engagement



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ABSTRACT

We examined the relationship between abusive supervision and hospitality employees' customer-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Employing the conservation of resources theory, we explain the mediating role of work engagement. We further examine the moderating role of hostile attribution bias in exacerbating the abusive supervision and work engagement relationship. Using time-lagged data from 12 hotels in China, we found that abusive supervision negatively affected service employees' customer-oriented OCB by undermining work engagement. In addition, our findings indicated that hostile attribution bias strengthened the direct effect of abusive supervision on work engagement and the indirect effect of abusive supervision on customer-oriented OCB via work engagement such that the relationships were stronger when hostile attribution bias was high rather than low. The theoretical and managerial implications of these results are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Abusive supervision, defined as 'subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact' (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), has gained increasing research attention in the field of general management over the past decade. Examples of abusive supervision include withholding needed information, scapegoating subordinates, humiliating them in front of others, derogating their status, and giving them the silent treatment (Aryee et al., 2007; Bies and Tripp, 1998; Hoobler and Brass, 2006; Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2009). A considerable body of empirical evidence has identified the destructive influences abusive supervision exerts on employee attitudes, behavior, and psychological health, such as job dissatisfaction (Tepper, 2000), reduced affective commitment (e.g. Tepper et al., 2004), interpersonal and workplace deviance (Lian et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2010; Mawritz et al., 2012;

Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007), poor job performance (Aryee et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2007), dysfunctional resistance (Tepper et al., 2001), and psychological distress (Harvey et al., 2007).

Although much is known about the devastating consequences of abusive supervision in the general management field, research concerning abusive supervision has not received adequate attention in the hospitality industry. To date, few empirical studies have examined the detrimental effects of abusive supervision on hospitality employees' in-role service performance (Jian et al., 2012). This is unfortunate, because service organizations now occupy 60 percent of the global GDP by serving millions of people worldwide (Economy-overview, 2014). Abusive supervision is considered a particularly destructive form of leadership that may seriously undermine the success of hospitality firms (Jian et al., 2012). Scholars have therefore called for more studies on abusive supervision in the hospitality industry (Jian et al., 2012; Tepper, 2007).

In response to these appeals for further research, this study extends the outcome effects of abusive supervision from in-role service performance to extra-role service behaviors, and examines the underlying mechanism (work engagement) and the boundary condition (hostile attribution bias) under which abusive supervision affects hospitality employees' organizational citizenship behavior, which benefits customers (customer-oriented OCB). Organ (1988) defined OCB as the 'individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward

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system and that in the aggregate promotes effective functioning of the organization' (p. 4). As Hinkin (2006) has argued, the hospitality industry is a people business. Since customer satisfaction is largely determined by the quality of service (Tang and Tang, 2012), the extent to which hospitality employees are motivated to engage in customer-oriented OCB directly affects the success of hospitality firms. Abusive leaders are characterized by a strong intention to exhibit enduring hostility (Tepper, 2000). They lead by belittling, disregarding, and ridiculing employees (Aryee et al., 2007; Hoobler and Brass, 2006; Tepper et al., 2009). We argue that when led by abusive leaders, hospitality employees' motivation to conduct customer-oriented OCB might be undermined. Therefore, the first purpose of this study is to identify and empirically test why abusive supervision negatively influences service employees' customer-oriented OCB in the hospitality context.

Second, drawing on the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989), we further explore the mediating processes underlying the relationship between abusive supervision and customer-oriented OCB. The conservation of resources theory argues that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valuable resources when they perceive an actual or threatening loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989). Because abusive supervisors usually humiliate subordinates in front of others, use aggressive eye contact, and intimidate their subordinates with threats of job loss, they deplete subordinates' resources and act as a stressor in organizations. According to some scholars, work engagement are potential results of high levels of resources (e.g. Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008; Halbesleben et al., 2014; Kuhnel et al., 2012), it is hence likely that abusive supervisor drains subordinates' resources and further depletes subordinates' work engagement. Work engagement is defined as 'a positive, fulfilling, and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption' (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). As several scholars have suggested, the presence of resources, such as job resources (e.g., positive feedback and social support) and personal resources (e.g., trait competitiveness and self-efficacy) would result in an accumulation of energy and thus contribute to work engagement (Karatepe and Olugbade, 2009; Llorens et al., 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). However, when led by abusive leaders, subordinates' work engagement may be stifled because they would conserve their energy to prevent further resource loss. In addition, studies have shown that work engagement is related to OCB, because engaged employees invest themselves more fully and are more willing to step outside the bounds of their formally defined jobs and engage in acts that constitute OCB (Liu and Wang, 2013; Rich et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2012). It is thus possible that abusive supervision inhibits hospitality employees' customer-oriented OCB, at least in part because abusive supervision impairs their work engagement. Hence, this study proposes a research model that offers a theoretical reason to explain the relationship between abusive supervision and customer-oriented OCB.

Third, we also shed light on the boundary condition under which this direct relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement and the indirect effect of abusive supervision on customer-oriented OCB via work engagement would be effective. As noted by Zellars et al. (2002), whether an observer attributes an abusive behavior to internal causes or external factors determines his or her reaction to abusive supervision. Hostile attribution bias refers to the extent to which individuals tend to attribute the worst motives to an action (Milich and Dodge, 1984). Due to their negative attribution style, employees with strong hostile attribution bias are more likely to attribute abusive supervision to deliberate actions, and thus are more likely to be threatened by it and may disengage from their jobs. Hence, this study proposes a research model that empirically tests the moderating effect of hostile attribution bias on the direct relationship between abusive supervision and

work engagement and the indirect effect of abusive supervision on customer-oriented OCB via work engagement. The examination of the boundary condition of hostile attribution bias is consistent with the contingency theory of leadership, which holds that the extent to which a leader influences followers depends on certain conditions (Howell and Dorfman, 1981; Yukl, 2006), such as followers' attribution styles.

To summarize, this research intends to make contributions theoretically and practically. First, it enriches the abusive supervision literature by going beyond in-role service performance to extra-role service behaviors, and examines when and why abusive supervision is related to hospitality employees' organizational citizenship behavior, which benefits customers (customer-oriented OCB) in the hospitality context. In addition, it also enhances our understanding of antecedents of customer-oriented OCB by focusing on the dark side of leadership. Second, drawing on the conservation of resources theory, this research investigates the mediating effects of work engagement, which offers new insights into the mediating mechanism underlying abusive supervision processes. The inclusion of work engagement as a mediator not only enriches our understanding of how abusive supervision influences hospitality employees' customer-oriented OCB, but also addresses the call to examine the nexus between abusive supervision and its outcome in its entirety, including mediating effects, in order to unravel the inherent complexities of the abusive supervision effects (Tepper, 2007). Third, by testing the moderating role of hostile attribution bias, this research extends the findings on boundary conditions under which abusive supervision influence followers. Last but not least, given the key roles hospitality employees play in serving customers (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003), our research findings should delineate useful implications for hospitality managers regarding minimizing the negative effects of abusive supervision and promoting customer-oriented OCB.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Abusive supervision

According to Tepper's (2000) definition, abusive supervision comprises three key features. First, abusive supervision should consist of sustained or enduring displays of a supervisor's hostility. Accidental exposure to hierarchical mistreatment would not be considered abusive supervision. The continuity of abusive supervision may be due to supervisors' powerful standing in dyadic relationships, as well as subordinates' helpless tolerance. Second, abusive supervision represents hostile behaviors that exclude physical contact. Thus, abusive supervision will not be exhibited in the form of physical violence; rather, it reflects non-physical hostility, such as emotional indifference and verbal aggression. Third, abusive supervision is a subjective assessment made by abused targets. As a result, perceptions of the same abusive behavior may vary across subordinates.

Extant research in the general management field has suggested that as a typical form of the "dark side" of leadership, abusive supervision prevails in organizations and exerts notable detrimental effects on subordinates (Martinko et al., 2013; Tepper, 2000, 2007). Despite the growing body of research on abusive supervision in the general management literature, little research has shed light on the impact of abusive supervision in the hospitality context. One notable exception is the work of Jian et al. (2012), which examines the impact of abusive supervision on hospitality employees' in-role service performance. Yet for hospitality firms, a type of employees' extra-role performance, e.g., customer-oriented OCB is especially important (Dimitriades, 2007; Hartline et al., 2000; Kelley, 1992). Because frontline hospitality employees interact directly with

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