



# The bad boss takes it all: How abusive supervision and leader–member exchange interact to influence employee silence

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## ABSTRACT

Abusive supervision is a dysfunctional leadership behavior that adversely affects its targets and the organization as a whole. Drawing on conservation of resources (COR) theory, the present research expands our knowledge on its destructive impact. Specifically, we propose a moderated mediation model wherein abusive supervision predicts subordinate's silence behavior through emotional exhaustion, with leader–member exchange (LMX) acting as the contextual condition. Two-wave data collected from 152 employees in the service industry in Macau supported our hypothesized model. We found that abused subordinates resort to remain silent in the workplace due to their feelings of emotional exhaustion. Further, the presence of high LMX makes the adverse impact of abusive supervision even worse. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed. We also offer several promising directions for future research.

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## Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a considerable academic and public interest in abusive supervision given its increasing occurrence in the workplace (Tepper, 2007; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014). Introduced by Tepper (2000, p. 178) as a dark-side leadership behavior, abusive supervision captures “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact”. Such hostile behaviors include angry tantrums, public criticisms, and inappropriately assigned blame. Abusive supervision has incurred huge hidden costs to the organization in terms of increased counterproductive work behaviors and decreased organizational citizenship behaviors (see Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013 for a review). Current literature has also conceptualized such form of supervision as a salient workplace stressor that has detrimental psychological impacts on abused employees (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Chi & Liang, 2013; Whitman et al., 2014).

From the perspective of conservation of resources (COR) theory, abused subordinates rarely report or retaliate against their higher-status supervisors because they are dependent on their supervisors for desirable resources such as continued employment and advancement opportunities (Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007; Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). To preserve

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their limited resources and alleviate their psychological discomfort, they tend to adopt avoidant or passive coping strategy by distancing themselves from the sources of stress (Tepper et al., 2007). Research suggests that victims of abuse may engage in regulative tactics (i.e., attempts to maintain relationships by avoiding contact; Tepper et al., 2007) and feedback avoidance behaviors (i.e., attempts to intentionally evade feedback from the supervisor; Whitman et al., 2014). Thus, employee silence, referring to employees' intentional withholding of critical or seemingly important information, ideas, questions, concerns or opinions about issues relating to their jobs and the organizations in which they work (e.g., Brinsfield, Edwards, & Greenberg, 2009; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003), should be another employees' natural and logical response to supervisors' abuse. Unfortunately, existing knowledge on the relationship between abusive supervision and employee silence remains limited (Morrison, 2014). The present study aims to extend this line of research by proposing emotional exhaustion, "a chronic state of emotional and physical depletion" (Harvey et al., 2007, p. 266), as a core mediating mechanism. In particular, we propose employee silence as a safe response for subordinates to conserve the remaining resources caused by emotional exhaustion rooted from abusive supervision.

Besides leaders' behavior, the relationship quality between a leader and a follower also exerts pivotal impact on the follower's reactions (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). While abusive supervision represents specific harmful supervisory behavior that occurs at any time during daily interactions (Tepper & Henle, 2011), leader–member exchange (LMX) refers to the overall quality of a supervisor–subordinate relationship that develops over time (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). To broaden our understanding of how bad leadership behavior and leader–follower relationship quality may interactively influence subordinates' well-being and behavior, we further predict in this research that LMX moderates the above proposed relationships. Building on COR theory, we postulate that abusive supervision in a high-quality LMX relationship can be more threatening to subordinates' valued resources, which culminates in heightened emotional exhaustion and silence behavior. Fig. 1 presents our hypothesized model.

The present research contributes to the current literature in several ways. First of all, it broadens our existing knowledge on the deleterious impacts of abusive supervision. By linking supervisors' abuse to employee silence, we answer the call of Tepper et al. (2007) for more research on subordinates' passive responses other than the well-established aggressive ones in order to capture the full picture of what goes on under abusive supervision. Besides taking aggressive reactions which may aggravate or ultimately terminate their relationships with supervisors (Tepper et al., 2007), there are still a number of subordinates adopting passive coping strategy to supervisory abuse (Chi & Liang, 2013; Wu & Hu, 2013). It is theoretically and practically important to understand how these employees work with their abusive supervisors on a daily basis (Tepper et al., 2007; Whitman et al., 2014). In this regard, silence is a particularly important passive reaction due to its widespread detrimental impact on organizations at all levels (Morrison, 2014). A bundle of well-known organizational tragedies, such as the collapse of Enron and Worldcom, have occurred due to employee silence. Moreover, without critical and timely information from lower-level employees, organizations fail to correct potentially serious problems and obtain instant ideas for continuous improvement (Milliken & Morrison, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008).

Second, by examining the moderating role of LMX, this study further extends this research stream by providing a relational context within which abuse exerts harmful influence. Most leadership research today has exclusively focused on either leadership behavior (i.e., leader-based domain) or supervisor–subordinate dyadic relationship (i.e., relationship-based domain; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012). The present study thus makes important contributions to the extant leadership literature by simultaneously taking abusive supervisory behavior and LMX into account and examining their interactive impact on subordinates from a resource conservation perspective.

Last but not least, despite the well-acknowledged harmful impact of silence, research on its antecedents is surprisingly scant (see Morrison, 2014 for a review). The present study also makes an important addition to this inadequacy by investigating the leadership influence (i.e., abusive supervision and LMX) as well as the underlying process of emotional exhaustion. From a practical aspect, our findings further call organizations' attention to the crippling impact of abusive supervision and provide important implications for organizations to prevent silence. It further draws supervisors' awareness regarding the impact of their leadership practice on subordinates' well-being and silence decisions.

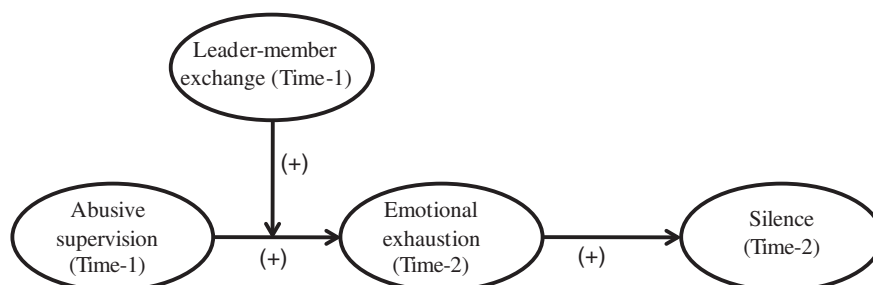


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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