



# Attenuating the negative effects of abusive supervision: The role of proactive voice behavior and resource management ability

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## ABSTRACT

While a large portion of the abusive supervision literature has examined the negative consequences of such perceived mistreatment, little research has examined individual-level characteristics capable of helping victims survive under such conditions. The purpose of this two-sample study, therefore, is to examine the factors that attenuate the negative affective and behavioral reactions stemming from perceived abusive supervision. Supported by recent extensions of the Job Demand–Control model (JD–C; Karasek, 1979; Meier, Semmer, Elfering, & Jacobshagen, 2008), we suggest that individuals who exhibit proactive voice behaviors and perceive that they are better able to manage their resources will experience less dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions, and reductions in work effort when faced with perceived supervisory abuse than those not demonstrating proactive voice and incapable of managing their resources. Cross-sample findings demonstrated support for our hypotheses. Implications for theory and practice, strengths and limitations, and avenues for additional research are discussed.

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## Introduction

Over 60 years ago, Hughes (1950, p. 321) noted that others at work “do the most to make our life sweet or sour.” Not surprisingly, considerable research seeks to understand how contextual factors make our lives “sweet” (e.g., perceived supervisor support; Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002) or “sour” (e.g., abusive supervision; Tepper, 2000). With regard to the latter, abusive supervision is defined as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained displays of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). The deleterious effects of perceived abusive supervision on employee health and well-being have been widely documented. For example, research indicates such perceived abuse impacts an estimated 14% of individuals annually and costs organizations exponentially more in terms of absenteeism, health, and reduced performance (Tepper, 2000, 2007). Unfortunately, the negative effects of perceived abusive supervision should be felt long into the foreseeable future as researchers affirm that incidents of nonviolent workplace aggression are gradually increasing (Burton & Hoobler, 2006; Burton, Mitchell, & Lee, 2005).

Despite its well-established theoretical foundation and over a decade of scholarly inquiry, the abusive supervision literature has primarily emphasized outcomes. Less attention has been directed towards understanding the factors capable of mitigating the harmful effects of abusive supervision. The research that does exist suggests that individual differences such as social adaptability (Mackey, Ellen, Hochwarter, & Ferris, 2013), emotional intelligence (Hu, 2012), and perceived job mobility (Wei & Si, 2013) are capable of attenuating relationships between abusive supervision and work outcomes. While these studies lack a single, cohesive explanation for such mitigating effects, factors related to control represent a common theme.

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The purpose of this study is to examine additional factors that offset the negative affective and behavioral reactions stemming from abusive supervision. Specifically, our study focuses on differences that emphasize one's ability to directly exert influence in threat-laden situations. Supported by recent extensions of the Job Demand–Control model (JD–C; Karasek, 1979; Meier, Semmer, Elfering, & Jacobshagen, 2008), we suggest that individuals who report high levels of proactive voice behavior and resource management ability will experience fewer negative reactions (i.e., dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions, reduced work effort) when faced with perceived supervisory abuse than those less adept and less vocal.

In doing so, we contribute to the organizational sciences literature in a number of ways. While past research has identified a handful of individual difference factors (e.g., conscientiousness, Nandkeolyar, Shaffer, Li, Ekkirala, & Bagger, 2014; emotional intelligence, Hu, 2012; social adaptability, Mackey et al., 2013) capable of mitigating the negative effects of perceived supervisory abuse, it is unclear what this array of factors has in common that allows individuals to survive (and sometimes even thrive) under conditions of supervisory mistreatment. Thus, this study contributes to the abusive supervision literature in that we utilize the Job Demand–Control model as a synthesizing framework by which we may better understand why certain individual difference factors may help individuals ward off the negative effects of perceived mistreatment. The factors capable of attenuating the negative effects of abusive supervision are especially important to identify given that abusive supervision reflects a *perception*, and therefore it may not be realistic to eradicate such sensitivities entirely from employees' cognitions.

Secondly, we examine a demand (i.e., abusive supervision) and form of decision latitude (i.e., proactive voice behavior) different from that which is originally specified in the JD–C model. In keeping with recent extensions of the model (e.g., Meier et al., 2008; Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997), we also examine an individual difference in control beliefs (i.e., perceived resource management ability) as a factor capable of inhibiting the negative effects of abusive supervision. As such, this study represents both a supplement and extension of the original specifications of the Job Demand–Control model to recognize alternate forms of job demands and decision latitude, as well as an individual difference in control beliefs.

## Theoretical foundations and hypothesis development

### *The Job Demand–Control model*

The Job Demand–Control (JD–C) model or “decision latitude model” positions strain reactions as the result of the combined effects of workplace demands and the amount of discretion (i.e., decision latitude) available for employees to manage (Karasek, 1979). The JD–C model is reinforced by two primary assertions. First, increases in job demands engender increased job strain. Second, individuals with the requisite decision latitude needed to cope with high job demands experience heightened psychological well-being and motivation to perform, while individuals faced with high demands and low amounts of decision latitude experience reductions in psychological health and well-being. In other words, job control serves to buffer the negative effects of job demands on strain. While the premises of the JD–C model are intuitively appealing, empirical support for the JD–C model, particularly for the buffering hypothesis, has been largely equivocal (e.g., de Jonge & Kompier, 1997; Ganster & Fusilier, 1989; Perrewé & Ganster, 1989; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999; cf. de Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003).

It has been suggested that this lack of empirical support is due to the overly simplistic nature of the JD–C model as well as the narrow classification of both demands (i.e., time pressure, work overload, role conflict) and control (i.e., autonomy, decision latitude) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Nonetheless, even Karasek (1979) acknowledged that other possible demands and sources of control (e.g., job-related personal conflict, fear of unemployment, p. 291) were likely to influence strain reactions. Other researchers have suggested that the buffering hypothesis may only hold true when examining specific outcomes (e.g., Dwyer & Ganster, 1991) or individuals working within certain occupations (e.g., de Jonge, Dollard, Dormann, Le Blanc, & Houtman, 2000).

In contrast, others have found support for the JD–C model, but only when individuals demonstrated certain dispositional characteristics (e.g., internal locus of control, self-efficacy; Meier et al., 2008; Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997) or were privy to external resources (e.g., social support; Daniels & Guppy, 1994; Johnson & Hall, 1988). In support, Meier et al. (2008) concluded that support for the JD–C model's buffering hypothesis was tenuous unless individuals possessed certain individual characteristics that allowed them to better, or more fully, exercise their control options.

Building on these supportive findings, we utilize the extended JD–C framework to examine the interactive relationship among abusive supervision, proactive voice, and resource management ability on theoretically and practically relevant outcomes. Specifically, the three-way interactions of these constructs on job satisfaction, turnover intentions, emotional exhaustion and work effort are examined in accordance with prior abusive supervision research (Wu & Hu, 2009). These constructs, as well as their combined multiplicative effect on each outcome, are discussed below.

### *Abusive supervision*

Abusive supervision reflects a subordinate's subjectively-held *perception*. As such, while subordinates' accounts of abusive supervision are not always indicative of their supervisor's objective treatment (Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013), subordinates will respond to abuse in ways indicative of their perceptions.<sup>1</sup> We suggest that abusive supervision represents the classic job demand, where job demands are defined as “those physical, *psychological*, *social*, or organizational aspects of the job that require *sustained*

<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasize that the proceeding discussion deals entirely with subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision; while some supervisors do engage in objectively abusive behavior, such objective abusive supervision is not the focus of this manuscript.

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