



# The role of cognitive processes and individual differences in the relationship between abusive supervision and employee career satisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

This study extends the career management literature by testing the relationship between abusive supervision and career satisfaction. Drawing from social cognitive perspective, we examine whether career self-efficacy mediates the linkage between abusive supervision and career satisfaction. Following the substitutes for leadership perspective, we investigate how organizational tenure and proactive personality moderate this mediated relationship. Data from a two-wave study indicates that career self-efficacy mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and career satisfaction. In addition, organizational tenure and proactive personality attenuate the main effect of abusive supervision and the indirect effect of career self-efficacy. The findings provide new insights into abusive supervision, career management, and personality research.

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## 1. Introduction

Because of an increasing reliance on knowledge tasks and rapid technological advancements, the retention of high-quality employees is vital for an organization's success (Biemann, Kearney, & Marggraf, 2015; Martins, Eddleston, & Veiga, 2002). Empirical evidence has shown that promoting career satisfaction and offering career development opportunities decreases turnover and increases the retention rate of high-quality employees (Kraimer et al., 2011). Despite promising progress in the career satisfaction literature, several questions related to this topic remain unanswered. For example, studies on career satisfaction have mainly focused on the relationship between positive leadership behaviors and employee career satisfaction. The linkage between negative leadership behaviors and career satisfaction has been neglected (Biemann et al., 2015; Martins et al., 2002). One aspect of negative leadership that has been the focus of a lot of recent attention is abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), which is defined as “employees’ perceptions of the extent to which their leaders engage in the sustained

display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000: 178). In spite of the growing amount of research on abusive supervision, one major omission remains—the examination of whether, how, and when abusive supervision influences employee career satisfaction.

Social cognitive theory proposes that employee self-efficacy is malleable according to the social context, and self-efficacy serves as a cognitive mediator linking leadership and employee behaviors (Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010; Lu, Siu, & Cooper, 2005). Career self-efficacy is likely to promote positive appraisals of and satisfaction with one's career development (Biemann et al., 2015). Hence, we propose that career self-efficacy mediates the effects of abusive supervision on employee career satisfaction.

Previous studies investigating the effects of abusive supervision on employees have generated conflicting findings. One possible explanation for the lack of consistency is that abusive supervision-outcome relationships are not simple or direct, but are moderated by other variables (Tepper, 2000). The substitutes for leadership perspective state that some employee, task, and organizational characteristics might substitute for leadership, which weaken a leader's ability to influence subordinate effectiveness (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). One substitute identified in previous studies is proactive personality, which has been shown to have a positive relationship with extrinsic and intrinsic career success, including salary, promotions, and career satisfaction (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). Another important individual-level

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characteristic is organizational tenure, which is defined as the length of time an individual employee has worked for an organization. It is thought that organizational tenure moderates the relationship between leadership and employee behaviors (Kim, Liu, & Diefendorff, 2015). In sum, this study integrates social cognitive and substitutes for leadership perspectives as moderating and mediating mechanisms into a single model that explains how and when abusive supervision undermines employee career satisfaction. We empirically test our model using two-wave data to examine the time-lagged relationship between abusive supervision and employee career satisfaction.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

Career satisfaction refers to an individual's reaction to unfolding career experiences. Employees' career satisfaction may be achieved when their organizational needs and goals are met (Joo & Ready, 2012). Abusive supervision, which involves behaviors such as undermining and ridiculing employees, is a salient workplace stressor that threatens employees and creates actual or potential loss of career development opportunities (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008). Thus, emotional exhaustion occurs as abused employees find themselves lacking personal or social resources to achieve career-related goals, which may directly damage their career satisfaction. In addition, employees participating in the career management behaviors including skills development, networking, and promotion achievements are expected to promote career satisfaction (Crant, 2000). Abused subordinates often suffer from anxiety and depression, and they may alienate themselves from their jobs (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012). In such a distressed psychological state, abused subordinates are less likely to participate in the career management behaviors such as developing necessary career skills and networking, so their career satisfaction should decline substantially. These arguments above yield the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Abusive supervision is negatively related to career satisfaction.

Based on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), individuals form their self-concepts through social cues drawn from how others treat them, so employees' treatment by others within an organization affects their self-concept (McAllister & Bigley, 2002). Because supervisors represent the organization, their treatment of employees is likely to influence employee perceptions of career self-efficacy. Career self-efficacy refers to the extent to which an individual is confident that he or she will overcome career-related challenges and experience successes (e.g., promotions and pay raises) (Biemann et al., 2015). Firstly, verbal persuasion from others is the primary cue influencing individual self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Abusive supervision signals to employees that their leaders distrust them, have less confidence in their abilities, and are unlikely to provide them with necessary resources for career development (Tepper, 2000). Accordingly, abusive supervision may convince employees by verbal persuasion that they lack the resources and abilities to meet career-related goals and overcome career-related challenges (Biemann et al., 2015).

Secondly, mastery experience, referring to an individual's past successful task accomplishment, is the key information source in raising employee perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Supervisory abuse reminds employees of their past mistakes and failures and undermines their perceptions of competence to the complete tasks (Liu et al., 2012; Tepper, 2000). Employees abused by supervisors may doubt whether they are competent enough to fulfill their leaders' expectations and achieve their own career-related goals (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011). These doubts make employees question their career and diminish any feelings of achievement they might have obtained from their job, which leads to lower career self-efficacy.

Thirdly, psychological distress is a pervasive response to mistreatment by supervisors (Zhang, Kwan, Zhang, & Wu, 2014), which hinders

the development of employees' career self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Liu et al., 2012). Abused employees may suffer from depression and emotional exhaustions (Tepper, 2000), and employees in distressed psychological states are less likely to participate in the career management behaviors (e.g., networking and developing necessary career skills), thereby damaging their career self-efficacy. As career self-efficacy is likely to engender employees' positive evaluations of and satisfaction with career development (Biemann et al., 2015), employees with low career self-efficacy may have damaged career satisfaction. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** Career self-efficacy mediates the negative relationship between abusive supervision and career satisfaction.

Organizational tenure refers to an employee's length of service in an organization, and it reflects that the experience of the employees have accumulated in their organizations (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Human capital theory (Becker, 1964) suggests that long-tenured employees have accumulated more job-related knowledge, skills, and experiences over their careers (Ng & Feldman, 2010). Accordingly, career self-efficacy of long-tenured employees is likely formed from job-related knowledge and experiences gained over a period of time, which is less likely influenced by supervisory abuse. In addition, an employee serving in an organization for a relatively long period of time generally has greater knowledge of formal organizational power structures and can develop comfortable routines for interacting with leaders (Kim et al., 2015). In other words, long-tenured employees should be more skilled at dealing with abusive supervision, which can protect them from the negative effects of abusive supervision on their career self-efficacy.

In contrast, short-tenured employees may have greater desires for intrinsically motivating tasks and experiences of self-control in the workplace (Huang, Shi, Zhang, & Cheung, 2006). They are also more likely to focus on career development than long-tenured employees (Huang et al., 2006). Thus, short-tenured employees facing abusive leaders are more likely to perceive a loss of career-related resources and supervisor support. Moreover, employees with shorter organizational tenure are also less skilled at dealing with abusive supervision (Huang et al., 2006). Thus, when short-tenured employees encounter supervisory abuse, they are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Tepper, 2000), which may damage self-competence to career development. Hence, we hypothesize the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3.** Organizational tenure moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and career self-efficacy such that this relationship is weaker when organizational tenure is higher.

The prior hypotheses form an integrated framework in which career self-efficacy mediates the negative relationship between abusive supervision and career satisfaction. Simultaneously, organizational tenure moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and career self-efficacy. It follows that organizational tenure should moderate the strength of the mediating role for career self-efficacy in the relationship between abusive supervision and career satisfaction (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). The following hypothesis states our predictions:

**Hypothesis 4.** Organizational tenure moderates the mediating effect of career self-efficacy on the relationship between abusive supervision and career satisfaction, such that the mediating effect of career self-efficacy is weaker for those who have high rather than low organizational tenure.

Proactive personality refers to the behavioral tendency of employees to identify opportunities to change things at work and then act on those impulses (Crant, 2000; Harvey, Blouin, & Stout, 2006). Compared to more passive employees, proactive employees are more likely to actively influence the environment to accomplish their career goals. Proactive personality is an important personal resource that can help individuals

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