The Effect of Abusive Supervision on Employee Work Alienation: The Mediating Role of Job Stress

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Abstract. Work alienation is a negative psychological state in which employees feel separated from their work. It lowers job satisfaction and raises turnover intention, and leadership style is one of its main sources. Based on social exchange theory and conservation of resources theory, this study examines how abusive supervision affects employee work alienation, with job stress as a mediator and perceived organizational support as a moderator. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 240 employees of Chinese enterprises, and 230 valid responses were analysed with SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 24.0. The results show that abusive supervision has a significant positive effect on work alienation, job stress partially mediates this relationship, and perceived organizational support weakens the positive effect of abusive supervision on work alienation. The findings add to the research on abusive supervision and work alienation and offer suggestions for management practice in Chinese organizations.

Keywords: Abusive supervision, work alienation, job stress, perceived organizational support.

1. Introduction

Leadership has long been a central topic in management research. Most studies on leadership style focus on positive behaviours such as transformational, supportive and transactional leadership, while negative leadership behaviour receives less attention. In daily practice, however, negative leadership is common and harms both employees and organizations. Many Chinese organizations have a linear structure with strict hierarchy and concentrated power, and the traditional idea that subordinates should defer to superiors makes it more likely that employees silently tolerate abusive treatment, sometimes without realising that they are being abused.

At the same time, the pace of work and competition keeps increasing, and employees face growing psychological pressure. As living standards rise, people also pay more attention to their psychological experience at work. Under these conditions work alienation easily appears. For employees it reduces job satisfaction, performance, creativity and well-being and raises turnover intention; for organizations it limits employee output and the effectiveness of the firm.

Research on the outcomes of destructive leadership is less developed than research on positive leadership. Since *The Leadership Quarterly* published a special issue on destructive leadership in 2007, abusive supervision has become an active research field, but empirical studies in the Chinese context remain limited, and findings from Western samples may not transfer directly to Chinese organizations. Existing empirical work also concentrates on employee behaviour and performance, and pays less attention to employees' psychological states such as work alienation. This study therefore examines the effect of abusive supervision on work alienation in Chinese enterprises, introduces job stress as a mediator and perceived organizational support (POS) as a moderator, and tests the model with questionnaire data. The results are expected to extend research on abusive supervision and to help organizations recognise and limit its negative effects.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

2.1. Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision developed from earlier concepts of improper leadership such as petty tyranny, bullying and non-physical aggression [1]. Ashforth defined petty tyranny as the use of power by a manager to oppress subordinates in an arbitrary and cold manner [2], and Einarsen described bullying as persistent aggressive behaviour suffered by employees at work [3]. Tepper first proposed the concept of abusive supervision and defined it as subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact. Typical behaviours include public criticism and ridicule, rude communication or ignoring subordinates, breaking promises and threatening subordinates with dismissal [4].

Tepper's definition implies four features of abusive supervision. It is subjective, because the same behaviour may be perceived as abusive by one employee and acceptable by another. It is sustained, because the hostile behaviour is shown repeatedly. It is openly hostile, so subordinates can clearly perceive it. It excludes physical contact, so beating or sexual harassment are outside the concept. Tepper's definition and his 15-item scale are the most widely used, and Chinese scholars have confirmed the high reliability of the scale in Chinese samples [5]. Later scales were mostly revised from it; for example, Aryee et al. removed items unsuitable for the Chinese context and kept 10 items [6], and Thau et al. combined Tepper's scale with a verbal aggression scale [7]. This study adopts Tepper's definition and scale.

Abusive supervision is a typical negative leadership style. It produces negative emotions and attitudes such as psychological distress and emotional exhaustion, and damages self-esteem, self-efficacy and perceived justice. According to social exchange theory, continued abusive treatment leads to low-quality exchange, which reduces work engagement [8] and finally lowers organizational commitment and increases turnover intention. Abusive supervision weakens psychological safety and therefore employee voice [5], lowers identification with the leader and job performance [9], is negatively related to organizational citizenship behaviour [10], and can provoke interpersonal deviance directed at the supervisor [11]. Some studies also report that a certain level of abusive supervision can raise short-term performance [12]. Outside work, abused subordinates experience more work-family conflict and lower family satisfaction [13].

2.2. Work Alienation

The concept of alienation comes from philosophy. Marx used it to describe the separation of workers from their labour when they lose ownership of its results. The concept was later introduced into management psychology to describe whether employees feel distant from and separated from their work. Seeman proposed five elements of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement and social isolation. Later definitions were mostly built on these elements; Mottaz, for example, removed social isolation when studying the determinants of work alienation [14].

Other scholars defined work alienation as a whole. Ashforth described it as a feeling of separation of the individual from work and the workplace [15]. Banai et al. defined it as a psychological state of separation from work caused by the failure of work to meet employees' needs or expectations, which signals a decline in work motivation [16]. Hirschfeld regarded it as a low level of positive effort in the work domain, a general lack of enthusiasm towards work [17]. Banai's definition is widely accepted, and this study follows it.

Early studies treated work alienation as multidimensional, while later studies prefer unidimensional scales, which are simpler to use but cannot show differences between dimensions [18]. Its antecedents include individual factors, job characteristics, organizational factors and leadership. Nair and Vohra found that lack of meaningful work is the main predictor of work alienation among knowledge workers [19]. At the organizational level, distributive and procedural injustice increase work alienation [20], and POS reduces it [21]. Leadership is regarded as the most

important factor: transformational and supportive leadership give employees control over and meaning in their work and reduce alienation [22]. Research on how negative leadership affects work alienation is still limited.

2.3. Job Stress

There is no single accepted definition of job stress. Selye described stress as a non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it [23]. Cooper and Marshall attributed job stress to a poor fit between the individual and the environment [24], and Lazarus and Folkman to a mismatch between demands and the individual's resources and abilities [25]. Park defined job stress as an individual's subjective response to work demands in the workplace [26]. Li and Liao summarised job stress as the psychological and physiological response to internal and external factors when people feel that work demands exceed their abilities [27]. Sources of job stress include the job itself, career development, role conflict, relationships at work, and organizational structure and climate, including leadership style. Because this study measures the stress employees feel under abusive supervision, the exhaustion scale of Schaufeli et al. is used [28].

2.4. Perceived Organizational Support

Eisenberger et al. proposed perceived organizational support on the basis of social exchange theory and defined it as employees' global beliefs about the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. When employees perceive support, they are encouraged and repay the organization with greater effort [29]. Researchers have proposed one-, two- and three-dimensional structures of POS; Ling et al., for example, identified work support, value recognition and interest concern in Chinese employees [30]. The unidimensional definition of Eisenberger et al. is the most widely accepted, and this study uses it together with the short form of their scale.

2.5. Theoretical Basis

Social exchange theory holds that people exchange material and non-material resources such as information and emotion in social life, and that exchanges usually follow the principle of reciprocity [31]. In organizations, leaders and subordinates exchange continuously, and the leader's behaviour directly affects the quality of exchange. When a supervisor treats subordinates abusively, they respond with negative behaviour or emotion. This theory is used to explain the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation.

Conservation of resources theory, proposed by Hobfoll, holds that individuals try to retain, protect and build resources, and that the threat or loss of resources causes psychological stress. Resource loss has a stronger effect than resource gain, and individuals with depleted resources tend to adopt defensive behaviour [32]. Under abusive supervision, employees find it difficult to obtain the resources they need and may lose existing resources, so stress and negative emotions increase. This theory is used to explain the links between abusive supervision, job stress and work alienation.

3. Research Hypotheses and Model

3.1. Abusive Supervision and Work Alienation

Abusive supervision consists of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviour by supervisors and strongly affects the organizational climate and employees' psychological experience. According to social exchange theory, individuals reply to the treatment they receive with behaviour of equivalent value. When subordinates perceive hostile treatment from their supervisor, they are likely to respond with psychological resistance. In Chinese interpersonal relations people tend to avoid open conflict and to tolerate it for the sake of apparent harmony, so the conflict becomes hidden. Abusive supervision therefore increases employees' uncertainty and anxiety, and employees may develop a feeling of powerlessness towards their work. Thus:

H1: Abusive supervision has a positive effect on subordinates' work alienation.

3.2. The Mediating Role of Job Stress

Job stress arises from a mismatch between work demands and the resources and abilities of the individual. Abusive supervision is a continuous negative behaviour that damages employees' attitudes, mental health and work relationships. According to conservation of resources theory, employees under abusive supervision can hardly obtain the resources and support needed to complete their tasks from the organization or the supervisor, and when their abilities and available resources do not match the work demands, job stress increases [33]. Thus:

H2: Abusive supervision has a positive effect on subordinates' job stress.

Studies on job stress and work alienation are limited, but related research is extensive. Job stress affects burnout directly and through emotional labour and job satisfaction [34], and also through the psychological contract [35]. Burnout is in turn closely connected with work alienation [36], and alienation is itself one dimension of burnout. From the social exchange view, when employees under abusive supervision feel growing stress and believe that their effort will not be rewarded, they may develop meaninglessness and powerlessness, and work alienation increases. Thus:

H3: Job stress has a positive effect on work alienation.

H4: Job stress mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation.

3.3. The Moderating Role of Perceived Organizational Support

When employees perceive organizational support, they feel psychologically and practically connected to the organization, are motivated and care more about its interests. Recognition of contributions and support for work influence employees' intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm, and POS has been shown to reduce work alienation [21]. In addition, employees' feelings towards the organization affect how they perceive their supervisor. Employees with high POS may accept abusive behaviour to a greater degree and respond to it with a more positive attitude, which reduces the alienation it causes. Thus:

H5: POS moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation, such that the positive effect is weaker when POS is higher.

3.4. Research Model

Based on the hypotheses above, the research model is shown in Fig. 1.

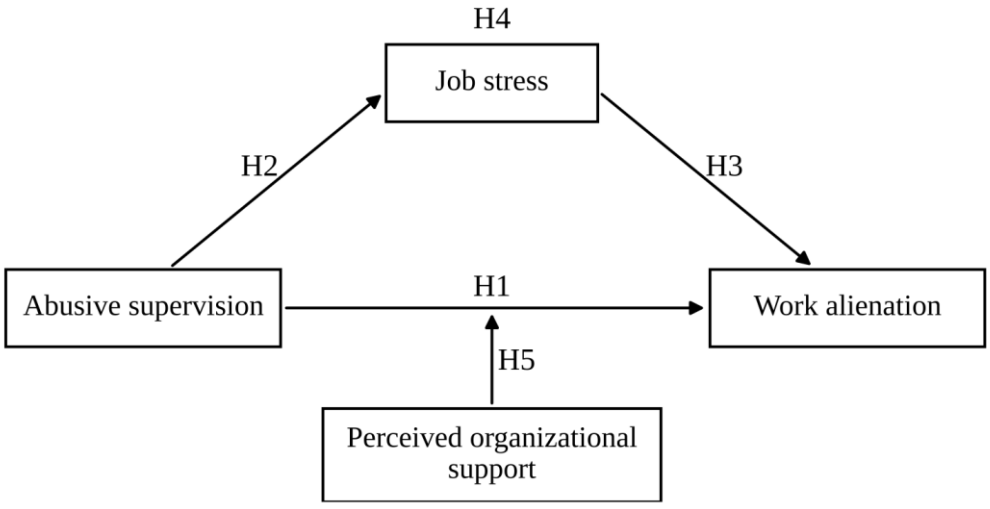


Fig. 1 Research model

4. Research Method

4.1. Sample and Procedure

Data were collected by questionnaires distributed randomly through an online platform. Because the questions are sensitive, the first page of each questionnaire explained the purpose of the survey and guaranteed confidentiality. A total of 240 questionnaires were returned, and 230 valid questionnaires were retained after removing invalid ones, an effective rate of 95.8%. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 230)

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	110	47.8
	Female	120	52.2
Marital status	Married	83	36.1
	Unmarried	147	63.9
Age	Under 30	141	61.3
	30-45	67	29.1
	Over 45	22	9.6
Education	Below high school	9	3.9
	High school or technical school	33	14.3
	Junior college or bachelor	123	53.5
	Master or above	65	28.3
Tenure	Less than 3 years	25	10.9
	3-6 years	67	29.1
	6-10 years	123	53.5
	More than 10 years	15	6.6

4.2. Measures

Established scales were used for all variables. Abusive supervision was measured with Tepper's scale [4]. Items that were difficult for Chinese employees to understand were removed after the pilot test, leaving 11 items, such as "My supervisor ridicules me" and "My supervisor lies to me". Work alienation was measured with a 25-item scale covering powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement and social isolation, for example "Rewards and punishments are unclear, and it makes no difference how much I do". Job stress was measured with six items adapted from Schaufeli et al. [28], such as "I feel emotionally drained by my work". POS was measured with the six-item short form of the scale of Eisenberger et al. [29], for example "Help is available from the company when I have a problem". Gender, marital status, age, education and tenure were included as control variables and coded as categorical numbers.

4.3. Data Analysis

SPSS 25.0 was used for reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and hierarchical regression, and AMOS 24.0 was used for confirmatory factor analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess reliability. As shown in Table 2, the alpha values of all variables are above 0.9, which indicates high internal consistency.

Table 2. Reliability of the scales

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Abusive supervision	0.943	11
Work alienation	0.981	25
Job stress	0.962	6
POS	0.905	6

The KMO value of the scale is 0.976 and Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant (approximate chi-square = 12863.893, df = 1128, $p < 0.001$), so the data are suitable for factor analysis. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation extracted four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, corresponding to the four variables. All factor loadings are above 0.6, and the four factors explain 76.527% of the total variance.

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test discriminant validity. As shown in Table 3, the four-factor model fits the data well (chi-square/df = 1.14, RMSEA = 0.025, IFI, CFI and TLI = 0.988, NFI = 0.912), and its fit is clearly better than that of the three-factor model (work alienation and job stress combined), the two-factor model (abusive supervision and POS also combined) and the one-factor model. The four variables therefore have good discriminant validity.

Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	IFI	CFI	NFI	TLI
Four-factor	1224.514	1074	1.140	0.025	0.988	0.988	0.912	0.988
Three-factor	2209.560	1077	2.052	0.068	0.912	0.911	0.841	0.907
Two-factor	3021.636	1079	2.800	0.089	0.848	0.848	0.782	0.841
One-factor	4245.726	1080	3.931	0.113	0.753	0.752	0.694	0.741

5.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The means, standard deviations and correlations are shown in Table 4. Abusive supervision is positively correlated with work alienation ($r = 0.451$, $p < 0.01$) and job stress ($r = 0.398$, $p < 0.01$), job stress is positively correlated with work alienation ($r = 0.676$, $p < 0.01$), and POS is negatively correlated with work alienation ($r = -0.402$, $p < 0.01$). These results give preliminary support to the hypotheses. In the tables, Marital denotes marital status, Edu. education, AS abusive supervision, WA work alienation and JS job stress.

Table 4. Means, standard deviations and correlations (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Gender	0.52	0.50								
2 Marital	0.64	0.48	.096							
3 Age	1.48	0.67	-.156*	-.844**						
4 Edu.	3.06	0.76	-.038	-.011	-.007					
5 Tenure	2.56	0.77	.104	.084	-.074	.039				
6 AS	2.19	0.94	.042	.019	-.005	.006	.044			
7 WA	3.25	1.71	-.077	-.054	.072	-.041	.020	.451**		
8 JS	3.04	1.72	-.106	.063	-.046	.003	-.058	.398**	.676**	
9 POS	3.38	1.12	.076	-.008	-.008	.075	-.013	-.154*	-.402**	-.368**

5.3. Main Effect and Mediating Effect

Hierarchical regression was used to test the main and mediating effects (Table 5). Model 4 shows that abusive supervision has a significant positive effect on work alienation ($\beta = 0.827$, $p < 0.001$), so H1 is supported. Model 2 shows that abusive supervision has a significant positive effect on job stress ($\beta = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$), so H2 is supported. Model 5 shows that job stress has a significant positive effect on work alienation ($\beta = 0.683$, $p < 0.001$), so H3 is supported. When abusive supervision and job stress enter the regression together (Model 6), the effect of job stress remains significant ($\beta =$

0.596, $p < 0.001$), and the effect of abusive supervision decreases from 0.827 to 0.385 but remains significant. Job stress therefore partially mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation, and H4 is supported.

Table 5. Regression results for the mediating effect of job stress (* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$)

Variable	Job stress		Work alienation			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender	-0.372	-0.429*	-0.247	-0.311	0.007	-0.055
Marital status	0.260	0.182	0.034	-0.054	-0.144	-0.163
Age	-0.015	-0.068	0.183	0.123	0.193	0.164
Education	0.005	-0.001	-0.099	-0.106	-0.103	-0.106
Tenure	-0.118	-0.153	0.075	0.037	0.156	0.128
AS		0.740***		0.827***		0.385***
JS					0.683***	0.596***
R^2	0.019	0.183	0.013	0.219	0.475	0.512
ΔR^2	0.019	0.164	0.013	0.206	0.462	0.293
F	0.891	8.346***	0.579	10.425***	33.610***	33.299***

5.4. Moderating Effect

The moderating effect of POS was tested by hierarchical regression after mean-centring abusive supervision and POS (Table 6). In Model 9, the interaction term of abusive supervision and POS has a significant negative effect on work alienation ($\beta = -0.255$, $p < 0.05$), and R^2 increases from 0.326 to 0.344. POS therefore negatively moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation.

Table 6. Regression results for the moderating effect of POS on work alienation (* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$)

Variable	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Gender	-0.247	-0.212	-0.292
Marital status	0.034	-0.086	-0.096
Age	0.183	0.108	0.073
Education	-0.099	-0.047	-0.039
Tenure	0.075	0.024	0.030
AS		0.731***	0.678***
POS		-0.508***	-0.548***
AS × POS			-0.255*
R^2	0.013	0.326	0.344
ΔR^2	0.013	0.313	0.018
F	0.579	15.352***	14.515***

To show the moderating effect more clearly, the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation at low and high levels of POS is plotted in Fig. 2. The slope is steeper when POS is low and flatter when POS is high, which means that POS weakens the positive effect of abusive supervision on work alienation. H5 is supported.

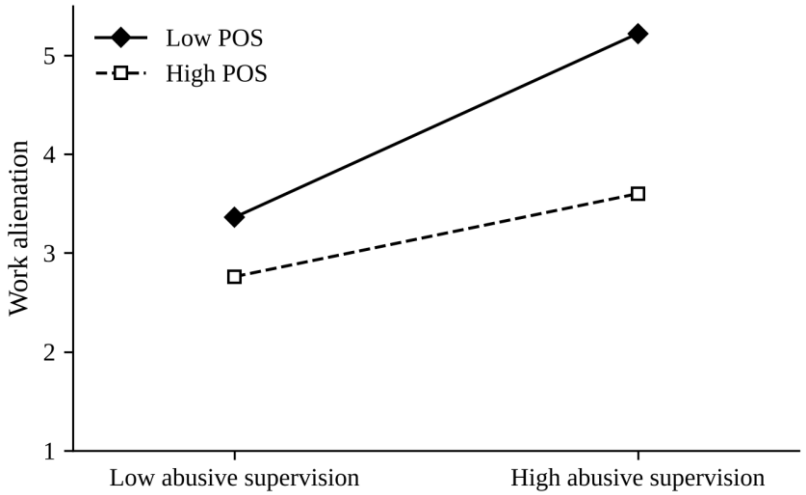


Fig. 2 Moderating effect of POS on the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation

6. Discussion

All five hypotheses are supported. First, abusive supervision has a strong positive effect on work alienation. When employees are abused by their supervisor, they may feel lonely, lose the sense of meaning and value in their work and lose the motivation to pursue personal goals, which can lead to lower performance and higher turnover intention.

Second, abusive supervision increases job stress. Employees with an abusive supervisor find it hard to obtain the resources they need, and long-term ridicule and isolation may make them doubt their own ability, so the work seems to exceed what they can handle. Job stress in turn increases work alienation: stressed employees worry constantly, become tired of their work and stop seeing its meaning. Because the effect of abusive supervision remains significant after job stress is added, abusive supervision affects work alienation both directly and through job stress.

Third, POS weakens the effect of abusive supervision on work alienation. When employees believe that the organization values their contributions and cares about their interests, their perception of the supervisor's abusive behaviour is softened, and they feel a responsibility to contribute to the organization. A supportive organization also creates a good climate that helps employees integrate into interpersonal relations and reduces their loneliness.

These findings have several implications for management. Organizations should monitor whether supervisors show abusive tendencies, build an open and trusting culture, give employees channels to supervise their direct managers and provide regular training and constraints for managers. Supervisors should respect every employee and avoid behaviour such as public humiliation and breaking promises. When abusive supervision is found, organizations should respond quickly by adjusting tasks and providing sufficient resources and support to reduce employees' job stress. Organizations should also provide both instrumental and emotional support, recognise employees' contributions, respond to their reasonable requests and offer clear promotion channels, which can buffer the negative effects of abusive supervision.

7. Summary

Based on social exchange theory and conservation of resources theory, this study examined the effect of abusive supervision on employee work alienation using data from 230 employees of Chinese enterprises. The main conclusions are as follows: (1) abusive supervision has a significant positive effect on work alienation; (2) job stress partially mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and work alienation; (3) POS negatively moderates the relationship, so the effect of abusive supervision on work alienation is weaker when POS is high.

This study has some limitations. The sample is limited in scope, and the nature of the job and the region were not considered, so the conclusions should be generalised with care. Most scales were developed in Western contexts, and cultural differences may affect how respondents understand some items; localised scales could be used in future research. Only abusive supervision and POS were considered as influences on job stress and work alienation, and other factors deserve study. Finally, the data come only from a cross-sectional questionnaire survey, and future research could add interviews and case studies.

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