



ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND WORKPLACE DEVIANCE: THE MODERATING ROLE OF POWER DISTANCE IN IT ORGANIZATIONS

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Abusive supervision is a growing concern in high-pressure environments such as Information Technology (IT) organizations. Guided by displaced aggression theory, this study investigates how such supervisory mistreatment can lead employees to engage in workplace deviance, defined as voluntary behavior that violates organizational norms and causes harm. When direct confrontation with abusive supervisors is perceived as risky or inappropriate, employees may redirect their frustration toward the organization through deviant actions. Furthermore, the study examines the moderating role of power distance orientation, the extent to which individuals accept and expect unequal power distribution. Employees with a high-power distance orientation are more likely to tolerate hierarchical authority and refrain from retaliatory behavior. In contrast, those with a low power distance orientation may be less accepting of unjust authority and more prone to react negatively. A cross-sectional, quantitative approach was employed using a structured, self-administered questionnaire. A total of 300 surveys were distributed among employees in Sri Lankan IT organizations, yielding 230 valid responses through convenience sampling. Validated scales were used to measure abusive supervision, organizational deviance, and power distance. Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted using SPSS to test direct and interaction effects. Abusive supervision was positively associated with organizational deviance ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of supervisory abuse led to increased deviant behaviors toward the organization. The interaction term between abusive supervision and power distance was significant ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$), confirming the moderating effect. A simple slope analysis revealed that the relationship between abusive supervision and deviance was stronger among employees with low power distance orientation (simple slope = 0.52, $p < 0.001$), while the relationship was weaker for those with high power distance (simple slope = 0.28, $p < 0.05$). The model explained 38% of the variance in workplace deviance ($R^2 = 0.38$). The findings support displaced aggression theory by showing that abusive supervision fosters organizational deviance, especially among employees who do not accept hierarchical inequality. Power distance plays a buffering role in this relationship. Managers must recognize the hidden costs of abusive behaviors and consider employees' cultural orientations.

Keywords: abusive supervision, displaced aggression theory, power distance orientation, IT organizations, workplace deviance

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Background and Theoretical Framework

Abusive supervision, characterized by sustained hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors from supervisors (Tepper, 2000), presents a significant challenge in high-pressure work environments such as Information Technology (IT) organizations. These negative supervisory behaviors often lead to workplace deviance, defined as voluntary actions that violate organizational norms and potentially harm the organization or its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). This study draws upon displaced aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939), which posits that employees who are unable to directly confront abusive supervisors may redirect their frustration through deviant behaviours against the organization. In addition, Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) is used to explain how abusive supervision undermines reciprocal trust and fairness in the workplace, fostering retaliatory behavior among employees. The study also examines power distance orientation, a cultural dimension introduced by Hofstede (1980), as a moderating factor. Power distance reflects the extent to which individuals accept and expect unequal power distribution within organizations. Employees with high power distance orientation are more likely to tolerate supervisory abuse due to respect for authority, while those with low power distance are more likely to resist or retaliate.

Over the past two decades, abusive supervision has received increasing attention in organizational behavior research (Martinko et al., 2013), highlighting its relevance in contemporary workplaces. However, much of the existing research has been conducted in Western contexts (Tepper et al., 2011; Khan, 2014), where cultural norms and employee behavior patterns may differ significantly from those in non-Western societies. Given the increasing globalization of the workforce, relying solely on Western findings may lead to incomplete or inappropriate conclusions when managing culturally diverse employees (Tepper et al., 2007). In response, scholars have called for more empirical investigations into abusive supervision within Asian cultures (Aryee et al., 2008; Martinko et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2012). This need is particularly important as Western cultures tend to exhibit low power distance, while many Asian countries, such as Pakistan, China, and India, are characterized by high power distance values (Hofstede, 2013). Thus, this study seeks to address the cultural gap by examining the role of abusive supervision and power distance orientation in the Sri Lankan IT sector.



Research Objectives

- ✓ To investigate the impact of abusive supervision on organizational deviance directed at the organization in IT organizations in Sri Lanka
- ✓ To examine the moderating role of power distance orientation in the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance in Sri Lanka

Hypothesis Development

Abusive supervision has been widely recognized as a detrimental leadership behavior that negatively impacts employee attitudes and behaviors. Defined by Tepper (2000) as sustained displays of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors by supervisors, abusive supervision can lead to psychological distress and perceptions of injustice among employees. According to Displaced Aggression Theory (Dollard et al., 1939), when employees feel unable to retaliate directly against an abusive supervisor due to hierarchical power or fear of repercussions, they may redirect their frustration through deviant behaviors aimed at the organization. This deviance includes actions such as withholding effort, damaging property, or violating organizational norms, which ultimately harm the organization. In line with this theoretical perspective, prior research has found a positive relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Abusive supervision is positively related to organizational deviance directed at the organization in IT organizations.

While abusive supervision may generally lead to deviance, individual and cultural differences influence how employees respond. One such cultural variable is power distance orientation, which reflects the extent to which individuals accept unequal power distribution (Hofstede, 1980). Employees with high power distance orientation are more likely to accept authority without question and tolerate supervisory mistreatment, thereby reducing the likelihood of deviant responses. Conversely, employees with low power distance orientation are less accepting of hierarchical disparities and more inclined to retaliate against perceived injustice. This suggests that power distance orientation may moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance. Accordingly, the second hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Power distance orientation moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance, such that the relationship is stronger for employees with low power distance orientation and weaker among those with high power distance orientation.



Methodology

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed for this study. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 230 employees working in Sri Lankan IT organizations, yielding a response rate of 76.6%. The study utilized validated instruments to measure abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$), organizational deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; $\alpha = 0.89$), and power distance orientation (Dorfman & Howell, 1988; $\alpha = 0.80$). Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted using SPSS to test both the direct effects of abusive supervision on deviance and the interaction effects of power distance orientation. Simple slope analysis was used to explore the nature of the moderation effect.

Key Findings

The results revealed that abusive supervision significantly predicts organizational deviance ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$), supporting the first hypothesis. Employees subjected to supervisory abuse were more likely to engage in deviant behaviors such as sabotage, theft, or deliberately reducing their work effort. The analysis also supported the moderating role of power distance orientation, which was found to weaken the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace deviance (interaction term: $\beta = -0.19, p < 0.01$). Specifically, the relationship was stronger among employees with low power distance orientation (simple slope = 0.52, $p < 0.001$) and weaker for those with high power distance orientation (simple slope = 0.28, $p < 0.05$). The overall model explained 38% of the variance in deviant behavior ($R^2 = 0.38$), indicating a satisfactory model fit.

Discussion and Implications

The findings offer several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study extends displaced aggression theory by demonstrating how cultural values such as power distance influence retaliatory behaviors in organizational contexts. It also affirms the applicability of Social Exchange Theory in non-Western settings by revealing how perceptions of fairness and reciprocity are disrupted under abusive supervision, leading to deviant acts. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of implementing comprehensive anti-abuse policies, develop supervisor training programs focused on ethical leadership, and introduce anonymous reporting mechanisms. For managers, the study highlights the need to foster equitable power dynamics and be aware of cultural differences in how employees perceive and react to authority. Human resource professionals are encouraged to promote psychological safety and cultivate low-power-distance norms to reduce the likelihood of deviant responses.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the research design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability or recall bias.



Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to better capture the evolving dynamics between abusive supervision and workplace deviance over time. Moreover, examining additional potential moderators such as organizational justice, emotional intelligence, or leadership style may provide a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms at play. Comparative studies across different industries or cultural contexts would also enhance the generalizability of these findings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the detrimental effects of abusive supervision on workplace deviance in IT organizations. It highlights the critical role of power distance orientation as a cultural buffer that shapes employee responses to abuse. In high-power-distance cultures like Sri Lanka, employees are less likely to retaliate against abusive supervision, whereas in low-power-distance settings, the likelihood of deviance increases. The study emphasizes the need for proactive organizational measures to address abusive behaviors and foster inclusive, respectful, and psychologically safe work environments. Such efforts are essential for sustaining employee well-being and organizational integrity in the global IT sector.

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