

Abusive Supervision Climate and Team Task Performance: The Mediated Effect of Team Identification, Team Negative Affectivity and Team Cohesion

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Abstract

In this study, we propose and test a mediation model to explore the effect of team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion on abusive supervision climate and team task performance. Using a sample of 48 dyads of employees and their immediate supervisors (N = 192) from nineteen companies and two industries in China, we find that there is a negative relationship between abusive supervision climate and team task performance. Moreover, the results indicate that team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion mediate the relationship between abusive supervision climate and team task performance. Theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords

Abusive supervision climate; team task performance; team identification; team negative affectivity; team cohesion.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Previous research has indicated that abusive supervision negatively influences various organizational outcomes. However, the antecedents and psychological mechanisms of abusive supervision are not well understood, especially in the Chinese context. In recent years, organizational researchers have devoted substantial attention to harmful behaviors perpetrated by individuals who hold positions of authority within organizations (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006).

Workers in China have enjoyed increased salaries and benefits as a result of continuing globalization and rapid economic development. However, Chinese workers do not show commensurately growing satisfaction levels with their organizations (Si, Wei, & Li, 2008). Moreover, prior literature shows that a dark side of management – abusive supervision – is widespread in Chinese organization (Liu, Wu, & Lin, 2009). The extant research demonstrates that those behaviours negatively impact various organizational outcomes through decreased job satisfaction (Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, & Ensley, 2004), citizenship behaviours (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), contextual performance (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008), commitment (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007), increased emotional exhaustion (Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007), counterproductive behaviours (Wei & Si, 2013), deviance (Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Geider, Hu, & Hua, 2009), and psychological distress (Tepper, 2000).

1.2. Research Problems

Despite such well-known and unfavourable results, little attention has been paid to identifying the mediators of abusive supervision and team task performance (Aryee et al., 2007; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006; Tepper et al., 2011). Through a better

understanding of when and why abusive supervision develops, researchers can identify ways to minimize its occurrence and its destructive Consequences.

Accordingly, the first purpose of this study is to examine, in the Chinese context, the effects of abusive supervision climate and begin to address this gap in the literature. Specially, this study tests the consequences of a dispersion-based model of unit-level abusive supervision on employee attitudes and behaviors. The potential mediation role of team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion are also examined. Last, this research tests the incremental effects of unit-level abusive supervision on employee team task performance, over and above the effect of abusive supervision (i.e., individual-level abusive supervision).

1.3. Research Objectives

First, this study extends past research by testing the relevance of a dispersion-based conceptualization of unit-level abusive supervision. More recently, Tepper et al. (2011) showed that supervisors were more likely to be abusive toward subordinates that they perceived to be dissimilar to them on deep-level attributes (e.g., values), and this was mediated by team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion. Interestingly, these relationships were observed only for subordinates judged to have low job performance (Tepper et al., 2011). Harris et al. (2011) have also found that supervisors tend to be abusive only toward subordinates with whom they have poor quality relationships with (i.e., low quality leader-member exchange (team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion))—individuals who have also been associated with low performance (Deluga & Perry, 1994; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993). The evidence to date therefore strongly indicates that supervisors tend not to be equally abusive toward all of their subordinates. This raises important considerations in a work unit where multiple people report to the same supervisor. When unit members are aware of and observe the supervisor regularly being abusive toward some members but not others, a different form of collective experience is likely to materialize. The term abusive supervision variability is used in this paper to describe the unit-level phenomenon that occurs when a supervisor engages in differential abusive treatment toward employees who belong to the same work unit.

These relationships are schematically represented in Figure 1.

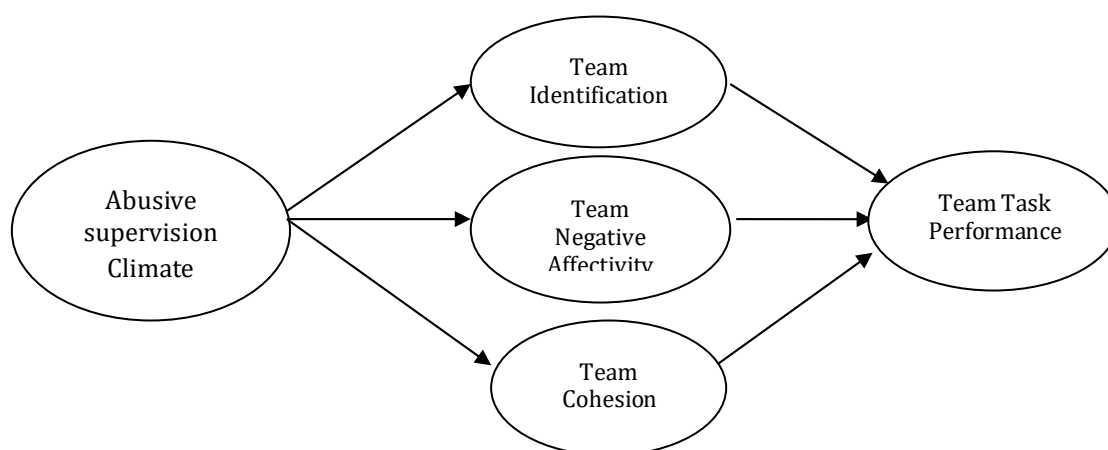


Figure 1. Research Model

1.4. Research Significance

This paper contributes to the literature by testing a potential explanation for why abusive supervision variability influences work outcomes. In addition, this research examines the extent to which team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion mediates the relationships between abusive supervision variability and the task performance. A number of studies to date have established the effects of abusive supervision (see Tepper, 2007 for a

review). The effects of team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion may however take a different form in a unit characterized by high abusive supervision variability. In sum, the present research represents an initial attempt to develop and test a comprehensive model of the consequences of abusive supervision. To this end, this paper draws from the theory of social exchange to develop insights into how members of the unit, are likely to react to abusive supervision variability.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis

2.1. Abusive Supervision Climate and Team Task Performance

Abusive supervision has been shown to have significant negative consequences for employees' wellbeing, attitudes, and behavior. Tepper (2000, p. 178) defines abusive supervision as subordinates perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. Abusive supervisors are known to intimidate and humiliate, use derogatory names, shout, and ridicule their employees. Estimates suggest that more than 13 % of working people in the United States become targets of abusive supervision or non-physical hostility perpetrated by employees' immediate superiors (Schat et al. 2006).

Abusive supervision is related to lower levels of satisfaction, commitment, and citizenship behaviours, and higher levels of turnover, deviance, and psychological distress (Aryee et al., 2007; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2009). The few studies that have investigated the antecedents of abusive supervision have suggested that organizational injustice elicits abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2006): supervisors subjected to an injustice are more abusive toward their subordinates (Aryee et al., 2007). Furthermore, experiencing contract violation also affects abuse (Hoobler & Brass, 2006).

It can be observed in brief literature review related to abusive supervision climate that abusive supervision climate is taken as independent variable which is proved to be related to Job dissatisfaction, OCB, Employee outcomes etc. The extant research demonstrates that those behaviors negatively impact various organizational outcomes through decreased job satisfaction (Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, & Ensley, 2004), citizenship behaviours (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), contextual performance (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008), commitment (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007), increased emotional exhaustion (Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007), counterproductive behaviours (Wei & Si, 2013), deviance (Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Geider, Hu, & Hua, 2009), and psychological distress (Tepper, 2000). However, despite such well-known and unfavourable results, little attention has been paid to identifying the antecedents of abusive supervision (Aryee et al., 2007; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006; Tepper et al., 2011). Through a better understanding of when and why abusive supervision develops, researchers can identify ways to minimize its occurrence and its destructive consequences.

Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision climate will negatively related to team task performance.

2.2. The Mediating Role of Team Identification

Team identification is derived from social identity theory and reflects team members' self-concept of the value and emotion attached to their membership (Tajfel, 1978). Compared to other organization-related psychological variables, until recently it has largely been neglected as a research topic. Team identification in the workplace is an important factor in making members loyal to their teams, increasing their satisfaction, and, ultimately, improving team performance, team innovation, and job-related abilities, and, thus, team effectiveness.

Affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) posits that individuals appraise 'affective events' cognitively, assessing the event's relevance and importance to their personal well-being.

These appraisals induce discrete emotions such as joy or anger (Pirola-Merlo, Hartel, Mann, & Hirst, 2002) and behavioural responses. One reaction may be decreased organizational identification and individual and organizational values, and reduces the perception of oneness and belongingness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Pratt, 1998). Decreased organizational identification can create negative motivation, decisionmaking, and behaviour (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998).

In China's high power distance culture, subordinates are expected to obey supervisors. Most Western companies have collective bargaining agreements that may limit managers in their freedom to generate abusive supervisory environments. Chinese companies, however, have no such managerial limitations. Therefore, Chinese managers can more easily engage in abusive behaviour when they feel unjustly treated. In addition, Chinese managers believe that subordinates are not allowed to challenge their authority, so they feel no need to restrain their negative behaviour toward them. Those observations lead to my first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Team identification will mediate the relationship between abusive supervision climate and team task performance.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Team Negative Affectivity

Within the field of affect research, a distinction has been made between affect as a trait or state (Watson & Clark, 1984). State affect usually refers to one's feelings at any given moment in time. Alternatively, trait affect or affectivity is the dispositional tendency to experience certain affective states over time. In this study, my emphasis is on trait affect. Researchers have debated extensively which factors or dimensions most closely capture dispositional affect (e.g., Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999). A full review of the debate on the structure of affect goes beyond the scope of this paper; however, the majority of studies have used the positive activation-negative activation approach (Barsade, Brief, & Spataro, 2003). Moreover, the vast majority of these studies adopted the conceptualization advanced by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988) that treats positive affect and negative affect as two distinct but related factors (Diener & Emmons, 1984). Positive affect (PA) reflects pervasive individual differences in positive emotionality and self-concept. Individuals with high PA exhibit high energy, enthusiasm, and pleasurable engagement (Watson et al., 1988). Conversely, negative affectivity (NA) is the dispositional tendency of an individual to experience a variety of negative emotions across time and situations (Watson, 2000; Watson et al., 1988). High NA individuals tend to dwell on their failures and shortcomings (Watson, 2000; Watson & Clark, 1984) and see themselves as unhappily engaged (George, 1992). Building on Gray's work (1970), we suggest that PA and NA are a part of two basic bio-behavioral systems that are linked to the behavioral activation system (BAS) and the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), respectively. First, the qualities associated with high PA (e.g., enthusiasm and pleasurable engagement) and high NA (e.g., insecurity and irritability) can strengthen or damage social relationships with supervisors and co-workers (George, 1991). Hypothesis 3: Team negative affectivity will mediate the relationship between abusive supervision climate and team task performance.

2.4. The Mediating Role of Team Cohesion

Cohesion describes the individual's perception of one's relationship with and the resulting force to remain in his or her group (Bollen and Hoyle 1990). Bollen and Hoyle (1990, p. 482) propose that perceived cohesion can be defined as "the extent to which individual group members feel 'stuck to', or a part of, particular social groups." Hence, their formal definition states that "perceived cohesion encompasses an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group." Overall, cohesion is a bottom-up emergent phenomenon that results from the interpersonal interactions within groups (Kozlowski & Chao, 2012).

According to the IMOI (input-mediator-output-input) framework of team effectiveness (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005), cohesion is factor for team effectiveness. As abusive supervision can be regarded as an extreme example of negative interpersonal behavior, employees will suffer from their leaders' mistreatment, resulting in decreased perceived cohesion. In order to explain the relationship between abusive supervision and perceived cohesion, I draw on social exchange theory (Blau 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005), which states that individuals are sensitive to valued outcomes they receive and that they are motivated to reciprocate these outcomes.

Hypothesis 4: Team cohesion will mediate the relationship between abusive supervision climate and team task performance.

3. METHOD

3.1. Sample and Procedures

I collected survey data from a sample of 48 dyads of employees and their immediate supervisors (N = 192) from nineteen companies and two industries in China, such as LESK Electromechanical Devices Corporation Ltd. Zhuhai, Bank of China, Macau, ALTIRA Hotel, Macau, China. Participants are private enterprises employees, mostly they are office workers and product developers and their respective supervisors, representing 90% response rate. Of the 192 respondents, 62.2 percent were male. Subordinates were predominantly married (86.2 percent), with an average age of thirty-four (SD = 7.14). The maximum age was 49 with an average reported organizational tenure of 11 years (SD = 8.06); the workers obtained an average of 15 (SD = 1.91) years of education.

3.2. Measures

The survey instrument will be administered in Chinese but originally constructed in English. Following research practices adopted in the Chinese context. Response options of all the measures in the survey ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Abusive supervision climate (time 1)

Subordinates rated their supervisors' abusive supervision using a 15-item scale (Tepper, 2000). Sample items included: 'My immediate supervisor gives me the silent treatment'. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.97.

Team Negative Affectivity (time 2)

I measured team negative affectivity using the Watson et al. (1988). The respondents report how they generally feel pertaining to a list of ten negative emotions. The reliabilities of the team negative affectivity measures were .86.

Team identification (time 2)

At Time 2 I measured team identification by the Team Identification Scale (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001). Interrater reliability and intraclass correlation coefficients were sufficient to warrant aggregation (ICC[1] = 0.11, ICC[2] = 0.96, mean Rwg = 0.87, Mdn Rwg = 0.81). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Team Identification Scale at the team level was 0.89.

Team cohesion (time 2)

We measured team cohesion with Chang and Bordia's (2001) four-item scale comprising items and because the distribution of the cohesion scale is slightly skewed, I used an expected error variance of 1.34 (Lebreton & Senter, 2008).

Team performance (time 3)

The team leader evaluated team performance using the scale developed by Rousseau and Aubé (2010). Team performance was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 very low to 5 very high.

Missing data corrections

For the variables of team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion, four respondents left one to two items missing. In these few cases, we substituted the mean of the remaining items.

Analysis Techniques

According to Bagozzi & Heatherton (1994), a two-step process of analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Medsker, Williams, & Holahan, 1994) with AMOS (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2001) employed to test my hypotheses. First, I used three tests to verify the distinctiveness of the two core variables. Second, I used a model comparison procedure to evaluate my structural models. Predictors were centered on their respective means. The results of the analysis may confirm the mediating effects of team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analyses

According to Bagozzi & Heatherton (1994), I used AMOS to do CFA and I combined the abusive supervision climate and team identification as three-factor model, two-factor model and one-factor model. By comparing the measured model, the value of TLI, CFI of four-factor model are 0.96 and 0.97 respectively, which exceed 0.9 and mean that the four-factor model fits best. The results indicate that the four-factor model provided a good fit, $\chi^2(41) = 76.57$, $p < 0.001$, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, root-mean-square residual (RMR) = 0.05, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, and goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.95. RMSEA scores were below 0.08 (Hoyle & Panter, 1995) and CFI and GFI scores were above 0.90 (Bentler & Bonnett, 1990; Bollen, 1989), falling within good fit guidelines.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

The descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations of the study variables are shown in Table 1. Perceptions of abusive supervision climate are negatively related to team identification ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$). Team identification is negatively related to team task performance ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$) and abusive supervision climate are negatively related to team task performance ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$).

4.3. Structural Equation Model

I use SEM to examine the main and mediated effects of abusive supervision climate and team identification on team task performance. Results of the mediated analysis are presented in Table 2. For Hypothesis 2, 3 and 4, Table 2 shows results. Model 1, the baseline model, represents a fully mediating model. I specified paths from transformational leadership to team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion, and from team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion to task performance and OCB. This model does not have direct paths from transformational leadership to followers' task performance or OCB. As Table 2 shows, all fit indexes showed a good fit (263.11, df 131; RMSEA .07; CFI .92; TLI .91). Against the baseline model, we tested another nested models. In model 2, we added to a direct path from transformational leadership to OCB.

In summary, the results shown in Table 2 support Hypothesis 3: leader-member exchange mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and performance (task performance and OCB). Figure 2 shows that the coefficient of the path from transformational leadership to team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion was significant ($.80$, $p < .01$), as were the coefficients of the paths from team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion to task performance ($.16$, $p < .05$). In support of Hypothesis 2, we found statistically significant and positive coefficients for the paths from team identification, team negative affectivity and team cohesion to both task performance. Thus, team identification

partly mediated the relationship between abusive supervision climate and team task performance relationship supporting Hypothesis 2,3,4.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	1.60	0.49	1											
2. Age	34.21	7.14	-0.12	1										
3. Education	14.92	1.91	0.09	-0.10	1									
4. Marital status	1.16	.365	0.04	-0.07	-0.04	1								
5. Tenure	11.44	8.06	-0.02	0.71**	-0.2**	-0.21**	1							
6. Stenu	5.19	3.55	0.05	0.49**	-0.07	-0.07	-0.66**	1						
7. Hour	41.40	3.02	0.07	0.17*	-0.07	-0.01	0.11	0.13	1					
8. abusive supervision climate	3.38	0.67	0.14	0.02	-0.16**	-0.01	0.01	0.02	-0.02	1				
9. identification	3.68	0.66	-0.05	0.06	0.19**	-0.01	-0.07	-0.04	-0.20**	0.29**	1			
10. negative affectivity	3.56	8.83	0.02	-0.04	-0.28**	-0.07	-0.10	-0.11	0.06	0.47**	-0.2**	1		
11. team cohesion	2.80	0.77	-0.08	0.05	-0.05	-0.08	0.07	0.03	-0.25**	0.30**	0.67**	0.14*	1	
12. team performance			-0.12	-0.19***	-0.01	-0.01	-0.09	-0.05	-0.01	-0.12	.30**	.22**	.25**	1

N=192 * p < .05 ** p < .01

Table 2. Comparison of Structural Equation Models

Models	X ²	df	ΔX ²	RMSE A	TLI	CFI
abusive supervision climate + team identification + team negative affectivity + team cohesion → team task performance	79.12	48		0.05	0.96	0.97
abusive supervision climate + team identification + team negative affectivity + team cohesion → team task performance; abusive supervision climate → team task performance	124.88	52	45.76** *	0.08	0.65	0.51
abusive supervision climate + team identification + team negative affectivity + team cohesion → team task performance; abusive supervision climate → team task performance; abusive supervision climate → team OCB	263.11	131	138.23* **	0.07	0.92	0.91

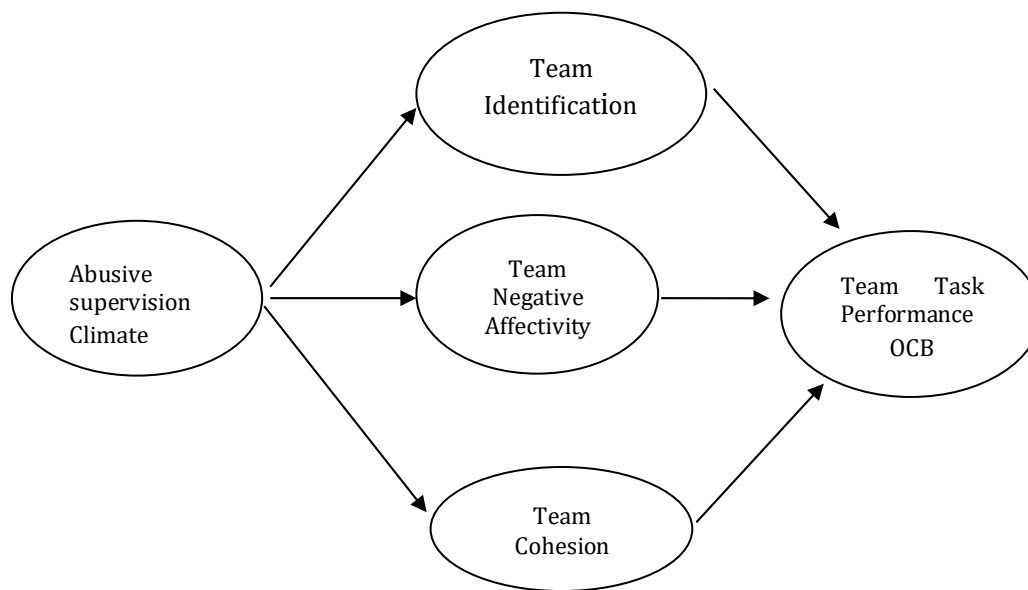


Figure 2. Results of Structural Equation Modeling on the Mediating Effect

5. DISCUSSION

1. Findings

The study examines a mediation process linking abusive supervision climate and team task performance via several intervening variables. The results reveals that abusive supervision climate and employees' team negative affectivity play active role in employee' team task performance during the process they complete their work and tasks. This finding is also in agreement with Pathak and Das (2003) who have indicated that the managers and the supervisors with. In reality, the results have significant guiding and enlightenment in management as well.

2. Reaearch Contributions and Implications for Human Resource Management

This study reasoned that there are boundary conditions to the reactions of employees toward an abusive supervisor. More specifically, it was put forward that as employees identify with their organization, they are expected to show weaker negative reactions to an abusive supervisor in terms of perceptions of cohesion and gossiping since organizational identification has a buffering effect on followers' negative reactions to abusive supervision.

This study contributed to research on organizational identification by confirming that organizational identification has an impact on employees not only in good times but also in bad times (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Van Dick et al. 2006; Van Knippenberg et al. 2007). Hence, in the most enduring circumstances (such as verbal abuse or intimidation), employees who identified with a larger goal of the organization reacted in a more positive way, i.e., they had a higher perceived cohesion and they had a lower tendency gossip. Future research on organizational identification and abusive supervision could look into the impact of work group or departmental identification on the negative effects of abusive supervision.

Indeed, organizational identification seems to work as a buffer on followers' negative reactions to abusive supervision. However, newcomers in the organization might be deterred by the presence of abusive supervisors because they do not yet identify with the organization or their organizational identification is just not strong enough to endure an abusive supervisor. The buffering effect of organizational identification may give abusive supervisors a free pass to act in ways that are inappropriate since such leaders might argue that followers' reactions will be less severe. In such a scenario, no efforts are being made toward the creation of a non-abusive

environment. Therefore, organizations should try to prevent the emergence or the existence of abusive supervision, for example, by fostering a culture that is incompatible with abusive supervision, by implementing 360-degree feedback programs, by implementing zero-tolerance policies, or by training employees to respond in an appropriate way to abusive supervision (Tepper 2007; Tepper et al. 2009).

4. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study was conducted by using a multi-source survey where both employees' responses and those of their supervisors were assessed. Such a multi-source design has been argued to be able to reduce common-method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). A second limitation of my study concerns the low levels of abusive supervision reported in my sample (mean = 1.38). However, as stated by Harris et al. (2007), this finding is in line with previous research revealing levels of abusive supervision ranging from low, such as 1.26 (Tepper et al. 2004) and 1.38 (Tepper 2000), to high, such as 2.06 (Tepper et al. 2006) and 2.70 (Biron 2010).

Besides, with the exception of team task performance based on ratings by the HR department, data on the other variables will be based on self-reports, suggesting the possibility of method variance. However, common method variance has been considered to be less of an issue in moderated regression (Pierce, Gardner, Dunham, & Cummings, 1993). For these reasons, the results may be substantive and not attributable to common method variance. In addition, the effective data is difficult to collect and the sample size may be relatively small. Future research should ascertain the external validity of the findings reported here in multiple organizations or in other parts of China.

6. Conclusion

Recent leadership research focused on abusive supervision and the negative consequences it has on employees' attitudes and behavior (Duffy et al. 2002; Mitchell and Ambrose 2007; Tepper 2000, 2007; Zellars et al. 2002). This study adds to this line of research by showing that employees do not necessarily react negatively toward an abusive leader. In fact, my findings showed that organizational identification functions as a protecting mechanism for the negative influence of abusive supervision on employees' perceived cohesion and their tendency to gossip.

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