ABSTRACT

This study examines the interactive effects of abusive supervision with subordinate’s power distance on subordinate’s interactional justice and personal identification. Results from 280 respondents show that power distance has exacerbating effect for low power distance subordinates who are less tolerant of supervisor’s mistreatment. On the other hand, high power distance subordinates are more tolerant and report lower levels of interactional injustice as well as higher levels of personal identification. Implications for the abusive supervision literature are discussed.

Keywords: Abusive supervision, power distance, interactional justice, personal identification

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been a surge in research interest in the dark or destructive side of supervisory behaviors with particular focus on abusive supervision (see Tepper’s review, 2007). Abusive supervision is an expression of non-physical hostility that supervisors perpetrate against their direct reports. Tepper (2007) estimates that abusive supervision affects 13.6% of U.S. workers while Tepper, Duffy, Henle and Lambert (2006) estimate the health care costs and lost productivity (in terms of absenteeism) for US corporations to be a staggering amount of US$23.8 billion per annum. Apart from costs to businesses, abusive supervision is also associated to negative consequences for subordinates such as psychological distress (Tepper, 2000), drinking problems (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006), family-directed aggression (Hoobler & Brass, 2006) and poor job performance (Harris, Kacmar & Zivnuska, 2007).

With more than 20 published articles related to abusive supervision, these studies have elucidated abusive supervisor’s nomological net from understanding the antecedents to outcomes of abusive supervision. A missing gap in the current literature on abusive supervision is the influence of cultural value orientation, particularly power distance orientation (Tepper, 2007). With increased workforce mobility and a globalised economy,
understanding how individual’s cultural orientation has differential impact on negative outcomes of abusive supervision warrants systematic investigations.

In this paper, I seek to examine interactive effects of abusive supervision with subordinate’s power distance orientation on subordinate’s responses (interactional justice and personal identification). Specifically, I posit a mitigating effect, such that high power distance orientation will lessen the negative effects of abusive supervision on subordinate’s responses. Figure 1 depicts the research model.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Abusive supervision and subordinate’s interactional justice

Interactional justice describes the quality of the interpersonal treatment that individuals receive at the hands of higher authority (Bies & Moag, 1986; Folger & Bies, 1989). The critical elements that are central to perceptions of interactional justice are clear and adequate explanation or justifications as well as treatment of dignity and respect towards the recipient. When the abused subordinates are yelled at and denigrated in front of others by the supervisor, they are likely to perceive interactional injustice as their supervisors fail to treat them with respect, propriety, and sensitivity to their personal needs. Empirical evidences have already demonstrated that subordinate’s perception of interactional justice is negatively associated with abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000; Aryee, Chen, Sun & Debrah, 2007; Rafferty & Restubog, 2010). Hence, consistent with previous studies, the hypothesized relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate’s interactional justice is as follows:

Hypothesis 1. Abusive supervision is negatively related to subordinate’s interactional justice.
Abusive supervision and subordinate’s personal identification

Besides subordinate’s perceptions of unfair treatment, subordinates are also unwilling to accept the influence of their supervisors and fail to personally identify with their supervisors. Subordinate’s personal identification occurs when an individual accepts influence because he wants to establish or maintain a satisfying self-defining relationship with the leader (Kelman, 1958, 1961). It reflects a conscious valuing of supervisor’s goals such that the requested behaviors from the supervisor is accepted or owned as personally important to the subordinate. Subordinates who identify with their supervisors share the same goal or value as their supervisors and are prepared to change their behaviors so that their goals and values are similar to their supervisors. They are motivated to help supervisors accomplish their goals such that they see them as their own personal success or failures.

According to the social influence theory (Kelman, 1958, 1961), the key antecedents to induce identification with the influencer are the attractiveness of the influencer as a role model and as well as the relationship that the target shares with the influencer. Through role modeling, the individual defines his own role in terms of the influencing agent’s role and will sculpture his or her own behaviors on the basis of the influencer. Supervisors who are role models and build strong relationships with their subordinates will influence their subordinates to share their goals and shape their behaviors and attitudes towards achieving supervisor’s goals. Transformational leadership and charismatic leadership theories have both demonstrated the importance of personal identification as an important mode of influence that leaders have on their followers (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Kark, Sharmir & Chen, 2003).

Building on the evidences that demonstrate the relationship between transformational leadership and subordinate’s personal identification, I argue that abusive supervisors will not foster subordinate’s personal identification. Firstly, abused subordinates are unlikely to attribute strong qualities to their hostile supervisors and model their behaviors after the supervisors. Moreover, abusive supervisors will not be able to build strong relationships with their subordinates. Aryee and colleagues (2007) describe the relationship between the supervisor and the subordinates as “poor” while Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, and Douglas
(2010) report a negative relationship between leader member exchange and abusive supervision. Apart from poor quality relationships, abusive supervisors also breed resentment and negative feelings amongst subordinates. Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) showed that subordinates actually retaliate against their abusive supervisors. It is not surprising to find that the absence of role modeling, poor supervisor-subordinate relationship and subordinate’s negative sentiments may explain why the abused subordinate fails to identify with his/her supervisor. Based on the above arguments, I propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Abusive supervision is negatively related to subordinate’s personal identification.

The moderating role of subordinate’s power distance

In Tepper’s (2007) review of abusive supervision literature, he urged researchers to examine the importance of cultural influence, particularly the role of power distance orientation. Power distance is defined here as the extent to which one accepts that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2001). The cultural implicit theories of leadership (Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999) provide theoretical justification to explain the strength of supervisor’s abusive behaviors on subordinates’ reactions is dependent on subordinate’s cultural orientations, in particular, one’s power distance orientation. Subordinates with high power distance orientation hold beliefs that leaders are superior and elite and deserve their respect and deference. These high power distance individuals are less likely to bypass their bosses as such acts are deemed as insubordination and are more likely to accept their own decision-making limitations while trusting that leaders provide more reliable decisions (Javidan, Dorfman, de Luque, & House, 2006). Typical behaviors characterizing subordinates with high power distance orientation include obeying leaders’ instructions without question; behaving submissively around managers and avoiding disagreements with leaders. Luthans, Peterson and Ibrayeva (1998) posit that “dark leaders” emerge in cultures that endorse high power distance. Leaders such as
Stalin and Great Mao were revered and accepted by their followers despite their tyranny. Subordinates that are higher, rather than lower, in power distance orientation are more tolerant of the power asymmetry and hence likely to accept abusive behaviors (or less likely to perceive that supervisors as tyrannical) and less likely to question their supervisor’s effectiveness.

Here, I argue that power distance orientation would also exert the moderating influence on the negative relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate’s personal identification. Subordinates with high power distance (more hierarchical) are more willing to accept and maintain their identification with their hostile supervisors unlike those who are low in power distance orientation (egalitarian). On the other hand, Tyler, Lind and Huo (2000) argue that low power distance orientation individuals are more likely to expect and develop personalized relationships with their superiors; as they view leaders as approachable. As such, low power distance orientation subordinates are more likely to be adversely affected by abusive supervisory treatment when the norms for personalisaed interactions are violated. Subordinates with low power distance will be less tolerant or willing to endure hostilities from their supervisors and fail to see any desirable qualities that they can emulate with their supervisors. Hence, subordinate’s power distance will have the moderating effects as follows:

_Hypothesis 3. Subordinate’s power distance moderates the negative relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate’s interactional justice; the relationship is more negative for those lower, rather than higher, in power distance._

_Hypothesis 4. Subordinate’s power distance moderates the negative relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate’s personal identification; the relationship is more negative for those lower, rather than higher, in power distance._
METHODS

Sample

Data for this study came from a large shoe manufacturing company located in Guangzhou, southeastern part of China. A total of 312 subordinates’ questionnaire were distributed and collected onsite. After excluding incomplete questionnaires and unmatched responses, the sample comprised 280 subordinates nested in 76 work groups. The final sample size represented response rate of 97%. The subordinates were, on average, 29.5 years of age and 60.4% were male with 62.1% having college or higher degrees.

Measures

All scales in the questionnaires were in Chinese and the standard translation and back-translation were performed (Brislin, 1980) to ensure the equivalence of measures. Abusive supervision was measured using 15 items developed and validated by Tepper (2000). Sample items of this measure include “My supervisor ridicules me” and “My supervisor tells me I’m incompetent”. The alpha reliability for this scale is .87.

Personal identification was measured with 5 items adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Shamir, Zakay, Breinin and Popper (1998) scales. Sample item includes “When someone criticizes my supervisor, it feels like a personal insult” with reliability alpha of .75.

Subordinate’s interactional justice was measured using 6 items adapted from Niehoff and Moorman’s (1993) scale. A sample for perceived interactional justice includes “When decisions are made about my job, my supervisor treats me with kindness and consideration”. Alpha reliability for supervisor’s interactional justice is .80.

Subordinate’s power distance orientation was measured using the 7-item shortened version of the scale used by Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen and Lowe (2009). Respondents assess their level of agreement with (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree to items such as “In most situations, managers should make decisions without consulting their
subordinates” and “Employees should not express disagreements with their managers.” Items were averaged with $\alpha = .70$.

*Control variables* include subordinate’s demographics such as gender, age, educational level and negative affectivity. I also controlled for *negative affectivity* as it was found to be related to workplace aggression (Barling, Dupre & Kelloway, 2008) and victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Subordinate’s negative affect reflects the extent to which he/she feels distressed, upset, hostile, alert and irritable and measured using 10 items adopted from the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The cronbach alpha is .81.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 presents the results of the confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) that examined the distinctiveness of the variables using Lisrel 8.8 (Jöreskog & Sorbom, 2001). Given the small sample size relative to the measurement items, we created parcel items to improve the ratio of N relative to the parameter estimates (Little, Cunningham, Shahar & Widaman, 2002). I reduced the number of items by creating two indicators for the abusive supervision construct. Items with the highest and lowest loadings for abusive supervision were combined first, followed by items with the next highest and lowest loadings, until all the items had been assigned to one of the indicators. Scores for each indicator were then computed as the mean of the scores on the items that constituted each indicator.

As shown in Table 1, the fit indexes revealed that the 4-factor model reflected the hypothesized constructs had better fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 490.15$, $p < .001$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, GFI = .85 and RMSEA = .08) as compared to the three-factor model ($\chi^2 = 533.70$, $p < .001$, CFI = .90, TLI = .88, GFI = .84 and RMSEA = .09), two-factor model ($\chi^2 = 788.65$, $p < .001$, CFI = .84, TLI = .82, GFI = .78 and RMSEA = .11) and the one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 933.30$, $p < .001$, CFI = .79, TLI = .76, GFI = .75 and RMSEA = .13). In other words, the four-factor model has the best fit with the data compared to the alternative nested models.
Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the mean, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities for the variables. Abusive supervision was negatively related to subordinate’s interactional justice, personal identification and power distance orientation and positively related to subordinate’s negative affectivity.

Table 3 shows the results of the moderating effects using hierarchical multiple regressions that examined the main and interactive effects of subordinate’s power distance and abusive supervision on: a) subordinate’s interactional justice and b) subordinate’s personal identification. One of the rules of regressions is the assumption that the relationships are linear. This assumption was tested using a scatter plot to examine the variables to demonstrate that these relationships were not curvilinear. To test the moderating effects, I regressed the control variables onto the dependent variables (subordinate’s interactional justice and personal identification). Here, the subordinate’s demographics (gender, age and education) as well as subordinate’s negative affectivity were included as control variables. In the second step, I regressed the main effects of abusive supervision and subordinate’s power distance on both dependent variables after including the control variables. To reduce multicollinearity, both the independent variable and moderator were centered at its mean. The results showed that both abusive supervision and subordinate’s power distance had significant relationships with the dependent outcomes using one-tailed test. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, abusive supervision was negatively related to subordinate’s interactional justice ($\beta = -.20$, $p \leq .01$). Likewise, for subordinate’s personal identification, abusive supervision was negatively related to personal identification ($\beta = -.17$, $p \leq .01$) thereby supporting Hypothesis 2.
In the final step of the moderated regression, the interaction term of abusive supervision with power distance was regressed on the dependent variables. Using one-tailed test, the results showed that the interactive term was positively related to subordinate’s interactional justice ($\beta = .08$, $p \leq .01$) and personal identification ($\beta = .06$, $p \leq .05$).

To interpret the demonstrated moderating effects, I solved for regression equations at high and low subordinate’s power distance orientation, without controlling for the demographics. Following Cohen and Cohen (1983), high and low levels of the moderator were defined by plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean. Figure 1 indicated that the predicted pattern of interactions whereby the negative relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate’s interactional justice was stronger for subordinates with lower power distance than for subordinates with higher power distance. Thus, Hypothesis 3’s prediction that subordinate’s power distance would interact with abusive supervision to influence subordinate’s interactional justice received support.

Similarly, Figure 2 showed the same predicted pattern of interactions whereby the negative relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate’s personal identification was stronger for subordinates with lower power distance than for subordinates with higher power distance. Hence, Hypothesis 4’s prediction that subordinate’s power distance would interact with abusive supervision to influence subordinate’s personal identification received support.
DISCUSSION

In this paper, I examined the interactive effects of abusive supervision and subordinate’s power distance orientation on two responses – subordinate’s interactional justice and personal identification with their supervisors. The results demonstrate that subordinates have differential reactions to abusive supervision. Subordinates with low power distance are less willing to accept the unequal distribution of power and hence will react more strongly to abusive supervisors relative to subordinates with high power distance who submit to unequal treatment by those in higher authorities.

Theoretical Contributions

First and foremost, this study answers to Tepper’s (2007) call to examine power distance as cultural moderator in abusive supervision-outcome relationships and explicated the effects of subordinate’s power distance on their responses to leadership behaviors. More specifically, the results showed that subordinate’s low power distance orientation has exacerbating effects on subordinate’s perceptions of supervisor’s interactional justice and personal identification with his/her supervisor.

While most of studies examining consequences of cultural influences were conducted across countries (see Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson’s review, 2006), this study focused on the effects of individual level cultural differences on their individual responses to supervisory behaviors. As the survey was conducted in Chinese setting where employees were expected to have higher power distance, this study provided empirical evidence that individual cultural orientation matters in subordinate’s differential reactions to his/her supervisor.

Practical Contributions

There are also practical implications for managers and organisations. In situations where subordinates have low power distance orientation, they are more likely to be influenced or respond negatively to abusive supervisors. Managers need to be aware of individual level
cultural orientation and should NOT manage their subordinates based on country-level culture according to the old adage “When in Rome, do as Romans do” and instead focus on sensitivity to individual cultural orientations to lead and manage their teams. One possible solution for HR practitioners is to need to conduct cultural training for their managers to mitigate the exacerbating consequences of their actions on their subordinates.

Limitations

Overall, the results provided strong evidence for the predicted relationships. Like all other studies, this study has a number of limitations that needs to be addressed. First, the cross-sectional design meant that causal inferences are implied amongst the constructs. Although the results demonstrate clearly the predicted relationships, future studies that adopt longitudinal design would address the issue of causality. Second, the data was obtained from a single indigenous manufacturing company and hence the results cannot be generalized across other industries in China nor to other cultural context. Third, all of the data were collected based on subordinate’s self-report, increasing the possibility that the results are biased by common source or method effects (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Yet the presence of interactions provides compelling proof against common source and method effects (Evans, 1985) especially if it is observed in hierarchical regression analyses. Future research may perhaps address other consequences of abusive supervision that can be measured objectively (e.g. performance ratings) or reported by supervisors.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that subordinate’s low power distance exacerbated the negative effects of abusive supervision on subordinate’s interactional justice and personal identification. In doing so, it addresses a gap in the literature on abusive supervision by examining the influence of cultural values. In today’s diverse workforce, organisations need to be aware of the exacerbating influence of one’s individual’s cultural orientation under an abusive supervisor especially for those with low power distance orientation.
REFERENCES


FIGURE 1 – Theoretical Model of Study

- Abusive supervision
- Subordinate’s interactional justice
- Subordinate’s personal identification
- Subordinate’s power distance
### TABLE 1 – Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses for Variables Studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1 – Hypothesized 4-factor model</td>
<td>490.15</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2 – 3-factor model (combined personal identification &amp; interactional justice)</td>
<td>533.70</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2 – 2-factor model (combined personal identification, interactional justice &amp; power distance)</td>
<td>788.65</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3 – one-factor model</td>
<td>933.30</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation

### TABLE 2 – Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations for Variables Studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Variables (N=280)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Abusive supervision</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>(.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Subordinate’s personal identification</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>(.75)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Subordinate’s interactional justice</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>(.80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Subordinate’s power distance</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>(.70)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Subordinate’s negative affectivity</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Reliability coefficients are shown on the diagonal in parentheses.

* p < .05. (two-tailed), ** p< .01 (two-tailed).
### TABLE 3 – Results of the Moderating Effects of Power Distance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Sub interactional justice (β)</th>
<th>Sub personal identification (β)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1 - Control</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate’s gender</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate’s negative affectivity</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate’s age</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate’s education</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∆R²</td>
<td>.09**</td>
<td>.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∆F</td>
<td>6.73**</td>
<td>2.88**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step 2 - Main Effects**

| Abusive supervision                    | -.20**                        | -.17**                          |
| Subordinate’s power distance           | .16**                         | .21**                           |
| ∆R²                                    | .27**                         | .20**                           |
| ∆F                                     | 16.78**                       | 11.39**                         |

**Step 3 - Moderating Effects**

| Abusive supervision X Sub power distance | .08**                        | .06*                            |
| ∆R²                                    | .30**                         | .21**                           |
| ∆F                                     | 16.29**                       | 10.35**                         |

Note: N = 280; Sub = Subordinate; *p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01 (one-tailed)
FIGURE 2 – Moderating Effects of Power Distance on Interactional Justice

FIGURE 3 – Moderating Effects of Power Distance on Personal Identification