Abusive supervision and subordinates’ proactive behavior
and the mediating effect of work engagement

Qin XU

School of Business City University, Hong Kong, China

mgxuqin@cityu.edu.hk

Jenny LEE

School of Business City University, Hong Kong, China

mgjenny@cityu.edu.hk

Drawing from Parker, Bindl, and Strauss’s (2010) model of proactive motivation and abusive supervision literature, this study proposes a model of the antecedents of proactive behavior. We used a sample of 189 employees from Chinese banks to test our hypotheses. Results indicate that abusive supervision has a negative effect on proactive behavior and that work engagement fully mediates this relationship. Theoretical and practical implications, limitations, as well as future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: abusive supervision, proactive behavior, work engagement
Organizations today are facing an enormous amount of pressure from the combined effects of rapid technological advances, diverse customer demands and fierce global competition. A relief to such pressure is employees’ initiative to anticipate their activities and promote workplace changes (Crant 2000; Parker, Williams & Turner 2006). Studies show that employee initiative, also known as proactive behavior, is closely associated with positive individual and organizational consequences, such as job performance (e.g., Belschak & Den Hartog 2010; Porath & Bateman 2006), job satisfaction (Ashford & Black 1996), sales performance (Crant 1995), and entrepreneurial behaviors (Becherer & Maurer 1999).

Given the importance of employee proactive behavior, its antecedents have garnered wide attention. One key situational factor that has been found to substantially affect proactive behavior is positive leader and supervisor behaviors (for reviews, see Bindl & Parker 2011; Parker et al. 2010). However, to date, few studies have examined how abusive supervision, a form of negative supervisor behaviors, is related to subordinates’ proactive behavior. This is surprising for two reasons. First, the existing supervisory leadership literature shows that the direct supervisor plays an important role in the workplace, such as influencing the mood of others (Madjar, Oldham & Pratt, 2002). Second, studies on negative supervisor behaviors have increased substantially (Frazier & Bowler 2012; Tepper 2007). Abusive supervision has been defined as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper 2000, p.178) and has been related to employee perceptions and behaviors (Mitchell & Ambrose 2007; Tepper 2007). Thus, it is important to investigate the effect of abusive supervision on subordinates’ proactive behavior.
In the current study, we also use an “energized to” motivation perspective to explain the relationship between abusive supervision and proactive behavior. Drawing from the model of proactive motivation (Parker et al. 2010), such motivation reflects an individual’s affect-related motivational states and serves as a key pathway by which contextual factors relate to proactive behavior. However, few studies have tested the mediating role of this “energized to” motivation. In our study, we propose that work engagement, implying an individual’s affect-related state (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma & Bakker 2002), is the process by which abusive supervision attenuates proactive behavior.

In sum, the present study aims to extend our knowledge of proactive behavior in two important ways. First, we investigate the role of abusive supervision as a predictor of proactive behavior. Second, we explore the mediating effect of work engagement on this relationship. With these two approaches, this study extends and examines the conceptual model of proactive motivation (Parker et al. 2010).

**PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR CONCEPT**

Employee proactive behavior is about initiatively improving things and challenging the current conditions (Crant 2000). Consistently, Bindl and Parker (2011) have defined proactive behavior as “self-directed and future-focused action in an organization”. They have argued that instead of being limited to a specific set of actions, proactive behavior could also be viewed as a process that includes four phases, namely, envisioning, planning, enacting and reflecting. Proactive behavior includes behaviors such as speaking up (Van Dyne & LePine 1998), taking charge to improve work methods (Morrison & Phelps 1999), and taking initiative to solve potential problems (Frese & Fay 2001).
ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND SUBORDINATE PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR

Supervisors have an important effect on subordinates’ work behavior, especially their proactive behavior. The direct supervisor can influence workplace climate, subordinates’ work-related affect, and then impact their behaviors (Frazier & Bowler 2012). Moreover, extant proactive behavior literature shows that positive supervisor behaviors such as supportive behaviors and transformational leadership behaviors (Parker et al. 2006; Belschak & Den Hartog 2010) can affect subordinates’ proactive behavior. Nevertheless, supervisors sometimes perform negative behaviors in the workplace. Therefore, examining the role of negative supervisor behaviors in influencing subordinates’ proactivity is necessary.

Research on negative supervisor behaviors, such as sustained display of nonphysical behaviors (abusive supervision, Tepper 2000), behaviors intended to hinder interpersonal relationship and work-related success (supervisor undermining, Duffy, Ganster & Pagon 2002), and vicious use of power and authority (petty tyranny, Ashforth 1987) have increased in recent years. Among these constructs of negative supervisor behaviors, that of abusive supervision is given attention in the present study because it is considered as a source of energy depletion (Aryee, Sun, Chen & Debrah 2008) and reflects an attempt to achieve some objectives but not an injury (Tepper 2007). Examples of abusive supervision include rudeness, open criticism and silent treatment (Tepper 2000).

A review of previous proactive behavior literature shows that the effect of abusive supervision has rarely received attention. One exception is a study that found abusive supervision to be negatively related to speaking up. That study also found this relationship to be mediated by psychological detachment (psychological uninvolvement in the organization, measured as intention to quit) (Burris et
al. 2008). The proactive behavior literature has been neglecting why and how abusive supervision influences an individual’s proactive behavior in terms of taking initiative to solve potential problems. To answer these questions, an examination of negative supervisor behaviors which deplete the energy of others would expand our understanding of the antecedents of employee behaviors.

In this study, we draw on Parker and his colleagues’ (2010) proactive motivation model and argue that abusive supervision has a negative effect on subordinate proactive behavior for two reasons. First, abusive supervision makes subordinates feel incapable when the latter is directly reprimanded or indirectly mocked (Mitchell and Ambrose 2007). Consequently, subordinates would perform proactive behavior less frequently. Another reason is that proactive behavior is a kind of risky activity that may ruin the actor’s image (Ashford, Blatt & Van Walle 2003; Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit & Dutton 1998). When employees experience abusive behaviors of their supervisors, such as putting them down in front of others and making negative comments about them to others, they tend to feel that their images are challenged and that the risks of performing proactive behaviors outweigh the gains. As a result, the employees would perform proactive behaviors less frequently. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision is negatively related to proactive behavior.**

**THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORK ENGAGEMENT**

Work engagement was first defined by Kahn (1990) as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles”. Later, Schaufeli and his coauthors referred it to “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind” (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma & Bakker 2002, p.74) and theorized that it comprised three basic components, namely, vigor, dedication and absorption. Vigor refers to a high level of energy, ability to work for long periods, mental resilience, and perseverance. Dedication
signifies a sense of meaningfulness, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge while working. Finally, absorption means working happily with high concentration, neglecting the passage of time, and having difficulties detaching from one’s job.

Work engagement has several features. First, it is a “state” that shows within-person variation over time (Sonnentag 2003; Tims, Bakker & Xanthopoulou 2011). Second, it is a motivational concept because it reflects goal-directness, persistence, and identification (Salanova & Schaufeli 2008). Work engagement also implies the allocation of physical, emotional, and psychological energy to work performance (Kahn 1990). Finally, it is related to an individual’s affect because it refers to how one is emotionally connected to his or her work (Kahn 1990).

Abusive supervision influences subordinate proactive behavior via work engagement for several reasons. First, proactive behavior is often ‘extra-role’ (Bindl & Parker 2011) and consumes an individual’s energy (Parker et al. 2010). When experiencing abusive behaviors, such as receiving negative comments about themselves in public, employees need to spend great amount of their energy to deal with such bad treatments (Wu & Hu 2009). Thus, they have less energy left to perform proactive behavior.

Second, individuals should regard the performance of proactive behavior as meaningful (Parker et al. 2010). When a supervisor practices abusive behaviors, subordinates receive the silent treatment and experience invasion of their privacy. They are also prohibited from interacting with their coworkers. Under these situations, subordinates do not feel proud of their work and thus are unwilling to dedicate themselves to their work. As a result, they are less likely to participate in proactive behavior. Third, proactive behavior requires full concentration on work (Sonnentag 2003). Abusive supervisors often
remind others of their past mistakes, blame others to save face, and break promises they have made.

Given supervisors’ negative practices, subordinates would find it difficult to concentrate on their work, and would be less willing to perform proactive behavior. Therefore, we propose the hypotheses below.

**Hypothesis 2:** Abusive supervision is negatively related to work engagement.

**Hypothesis 3:** Work engagement fully mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and proactive behavior.

**METHODS**

**Sample and Procedure**

Data were collected from employees working for three commercial banks in a city located in the southern part of China. Survey questionnaires were distributed in branches by a liaison person. Each set included a stamped envelope, a cover letter, and a questionnaire. The cover letter guaranteed the confidentiality of the responses and explained the aim of the survey (i.e., to examine supervisors’ behaviors and employees’ reactions). When employees completed the questionnaires, they were instructed to mail these directly to the researchers using the stamped envelope.

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed, and of these, 189 were returned to the researchers (response rate=75.6%). Among the respondents, 56.6% were women; the age ranged from 19 to 47 years (M=27.99, SD=5.10); 62.4% had a bachelor’s degree and 28.6% had a graduate degree; 68.78% had worked in their respective organizations for no more than five years.
Measures

Given that questionnaires were distributed in China, a double translation procedure (Brislin 1980) was followed.

*Abusive supervision* was measured using a 10-item version of a 15-item scale developed by Tepper (2000). This survey is culturally appropriate and has already been tested in the Chinese context (Aryee et al. 2008). Consistent with previous studies (Tepper 2007; Zellars, Tepper & Duffy 2002), we treated abusive supervision at the individual level. A sample item is, “My immediate supervisor makes negative comments about me to others”. Ratings were completed on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

*Employee work engagement* was assessed using the 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli & Bakker 2003, 2010). This scale has good factorial validity, internal consistency, and discriminant validity (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli 2009). A sample item is, “At my work, I feel that I am bursting with energy.” Responses were made on a 7-point frequency scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always).

*Proactive behavior* was measured using the seven-item “personal initiative” scale (Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng & Tag 1997). A sample item is “I take initiative immediately even when others don’t”. Ratings were completed on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

*Control variables* included respondents’ age, gender, tenure and education. These individual factors were chosen for the current study because these can influence employee proactive behavior (LePine & Van Dyne 1998; Fay & Frese 2001). For instance, men were found to be more likely to perform proactive behavior than women (Choi 2007).
RESULTS

Measurement Model Results

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses to examine the distinctiveness of abusive supervision, work engagement and proactive behavior. The results indicated that the three-factor model fitted the data well, $\chi^2(32)=58.45$, $p<.01$, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) =.07, comparative fit index (CFI) =.98, and normed fit index (NFI) =.96. The three-factor model was also compared with (a) a two-factor model (where work engagement and proactive behavior were combined into a single factor), $\chi^2(34)=101.45$, $p<.001$, RMSEA=.103, CFI=.95, and NFI=.93; and (b) a one-factor model, $\chi^2(35)=632.18$, $p<.001$, RMSEA=.30, CFI=.72, and NFI=.70. The three-factor model provided a better fit than the two-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2(2)=43$, $p<.001$ and the single factor model, $\Delta\chi^2(3)= 573.73$, $p<.001$. In other words, this analysis showed that the three-factor model was adequate to test the relationships.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The means, standard deviations, intercorrelations and reliabilities are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, abusive supervision is significantly and negatively correlated with work engagement and proactive behavior. Proactive behavior is significantly and positively correlated with work engagement.

Hypothesis Testing Results

We used the method developed by Hayes and Preacher (2011) to test our hypotheses. This method allows tests of direct, indirect, and total effects, as well as the confidence intervals for the indirect effect of abusive supervision on proactive behavior. The results of all three regression models are provided in Table 2. Hypotheses 1 and 2 propose that abusive supervision is negatively related to
proactive behavior and work engagement. These hypotheses were supported in Regression Model 1 and 2. Abusive supervision was negatively related to proactive behavior (B=-.24, p<.01) and work engagement (B=-.55, p<.01).

Hypothesis 3 states that work engagement mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and proactive behavior. Regression Model 3 showed that when work engagement was included in the regression, the impact of abusive supervision on proactive behavior became insignificant (B=-.08, p=.20). Additionally, the indirect effect of abusive supervision on proactive behavior through work engagement was significantly different from zero (95% Confidence Interval [-.245, -.084]). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

**DISCUSSION**

The primary goal of this study is to explore the role of negative supervisor behaviors in terms of abusive supervision in predicting subordinate proactive behavior. We argued that the relationship between abusive supervision and proactive behavior was mediated by subordinate work engagement. As hypothesized, abusive supervisor behaviors has been found to be negatively related to work engagement, thereby leading to lower levels of proactive behavior.

These findings are consistent with the model of proactive motivation proposed by Parker and colleagues (2010). The findings also extend past empirical research by suggesting that negative supervisor behaviors, such as abusive supervision, may predict subordinate proactive behavior, and that work engagement (a type of “energized to” motivation) may help explain the relationship between supervisor behaviors and subordinate proactive behavior. Specifically, our results suggest that abusive supervisors decrease subordinates’ proactive behaviors by making the latter feel incompetent,
embarrassed and unsafe when being proactive (Parker et al. 2010).

The results also showed that work engagement fully mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and proactive behavior. By not giving rewards for jobs requiring a lot of effort, and by making negative comments in public, abusive supervisors attenuate subordinates’ levels of energy, concentration, and meaningfulness. In turn, this decreases the subordinates’ levels of work engagement, leading to less frequent practice of proactive behaviors.

**Theoretical Implications**

The results of our study contribute to the proactive behavior literature in two ways. First, prior research has emphasized the predicting role of positive leader and supervisor behaviors (Bindl & Parker 2011; Den Hartog & Belschak 2012) and neglected the influence of negative supervisor behaviors in terms of abusive supervision. Given the harm of abusive supervision and the increasing interest in this area, our research provides a new and important perspective in understanding employees’ proactive behavior.

Another contribution of our study is the examination of a psychological process by which abusive supervision influences proactive behavior. Parker, Bindl and Strauss (2010) argued that individuals’ “energized to” motivation was a mechanism by which supervisor behaviors impacted subordinate proactive behavior. We followed the contemporary proactive behavior research (e.g., Hakanen, Perhonniemi & Toppinen-Tanner 2008; Salanova & Schaufeli 2008) in formulating that work engagement, a kind of “energized to” motivation, worked as a mediator in the relationship between contextual factors and proactive behavior. Thus, we contributed to the proactive behavior literature by theorizing and empirically testing a work engagement perspective that explains the relationship
between abusive supervision and subordinate proactive behavior.

**Practical Implications**

The findings of this study have implications for organizations. First, given that abusive supervision negatively influences subordinates’ proactive behavior, organizations should exert great effort to reduce the occurrence of abusive supervisory behaviors. Resources should be allocated to train their supervisors to perform appropriate and healthy behaviors when working with their employees. Those who demonstrated abusive behaviors in the past may benefit from this kind of training, especially in the areas of emotional management.

Another implication stemming from our work engagement perspective, relates to the mechanism by which abusive supervision impacts proactive behavior. Managers may be able to better control the negative influence of abusive supervision. Additionally, to promote proactive behaviors, organizations can enforce human resource management practices that provide developmental feedback and autonomy to energize the employees (Salanova & Schaufeli 2008).

**Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion**

Although the present study has some interesting findings, it has limitations that can be solved in future research. The first limitation is that data were collected by using cross-sectional design and self-report measures. Although our results are consistent with the model of proactive motivation (Parker et al. 2010), we could not rule out alternative explanations. Future research might solve this issue by obtaining more objective evaluations of proactive behavior, and by using experimental and longitudinal designs to infer the causal inference.

Second, this study used a Chinese sample, which might be a disadvantage. Specifically, abusive
behaviors towards subordinates may occur more frequently in countries with high power distance. Furthermore, reactions to abusive supervision may be less negative in countries with high power distance (Aryee, Sun, Chen & Debrah 2008; Tepper 2007). Hence, the negative consequence of abusive supervision may be even stronger in societies with low power distance (e.g., the United States). Future cross-cultural research should examine the boundary conditions of the relationship between abusive supervision and proactive behavior (Tepper 2007).

Third, data were collected only from the banking industry, so the generalizability of our findings beyond this industry might be limited even within China. It is extremely important to examine industry effects because “in industries where a primary objective is to remold the identity of new recruits, organizations may sanction the use of hostile behavior on the part of supervisors against their direct reports” (Tepper 2007, p. 283).

In conclusion, Parker and colleagues’ (2010) model of proactive motivation has been utilized as a foundation for research on proactive behavior (Bindl, Parker, Totterdell & Hagger-Johnson 2012). We further argued that the “energized to” motivation was an important mechanism linking individual and situational factors with proactive behavior. Results of our study strongly supported this idea. We recommend that future research continues to investigate the “energized to” motivation.
REFERENCES


TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, CORRELATIONS AND RELIABILITIES

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N=183-189. The Cronbach’s alpha internal consistency estimates are on the diagonals. *p < .05. **p < .01.
## Table 2: Regression Results for the Mediating Role of Work Engagement

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*Note: N = 189. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 10,000. *p < .05. **p < .01.*