

THE INFLUENCE OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION ON EMPLOYEES' WORKPLACE BEHAVIOR DEVIANCE – WITH LEADERSHIP JUSTICE AS THE MEDIATOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the processes linking abusive supervision to employee workplace deviant behaviors by focusing on the mediating effect of leader justice. The analysis of data from 224 employees revealed that: (1) Abusive supervision has significant effect on supervisor-oriented deviance, coworker-oriented deviance and organization-oriented deviance; (2) Leader justice mediates the relationships between abusive supervision and the supervisor-oriented organization-oriented deviance dimensions of workplace deviant behaviors.

1 INTRODUCTION

Historically, most researches on workplace behavior have focused on factors stimulating employee performance and effectiveness, with little attention to negative behaviors. As a spontaneous response to negative environment, the behaviors that are deviant in workplace would conflict with organizational norms, and threaten the wellbeing of the organization as well as its members. Workplace behavior deviance has been an issue of high concerns among practitioners and researchers alike; but the existing research is largely focused on the strategy of organizational control [4] or the structural classification of the deviance [5]. It has been found that the individuals' characteristics are not the main factors leading to workplace behavior deviance. More and more researchers turned to the perspective of the context for employee behaviors. Among the organizational factors, the perceived support, organizational justice, organizational atmosphere, and the types of the leaders could explain the workplace behavior deviance of employees [7]. Among related factors, the types of leaders and improper interpersonal treatments was found one of the inducing factors of behavior deviance [8]. Research in the issue of employee workplace deviance, however, has not received sufficient notice in China. The current study will look into the issue in China, from the perspective of negative leadership behaviors, specifically abusive supervision, to explore the lead factors of workplace behavior deviance.

1.1 Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision is the persisted hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior from the supervisor as perceived by a subordinate. In workplace, abusive supervision as defined above happens with a much higher frequency than physical contact. Many researches attested that abusive supervision would lead to the lowering of job satisfaction and organizational promise, scaling back organizational citizen behaviors, and lead to anxiety, depression, emotional burnout, and other negative psychological responses [12]. It has also been found that abusive supervision would be more common in countries that are more uncertainty avoidant, with higher level of collectivism, and larger power distance [11]; those characters fit the cultural characters of China. In a survey by Zhilian Recruit (a Chinese HR consulting firm), over 70% of employees surveyed indicated that they encountered workplace verbal violence; among those encounters, 70.1% were from their supervisors [33]. It is of vital importance that abusive supervision be studied and understood.

To study the relationship between abusive supervision and employee workplace deviant behaviors, we would first explore the components of the workplace behavior deviance. Both theory and empirical came to the observation that abusive supervision and retaliation and offensive behavior were somewhat related [13]. Employees who suffered from abusive supervision would tend to display deviant behaviors targeting at their supervisors, such as using damaging language toward the supervisors, ridiculing the supervisors, etc. The above behaviors can be seen as the first dimension of employees' workplace deviant behavior. On the other hand, to maintain pleasing self-image, or because of inability to directly retaliate the source of the aggression, or the fear of the inflictor's further retaliation, employees would grow the aggression targeting their own colleagues [14].

Based on the principle of mutuality, individuals receiving certain treatment would respond to the treatment giver in a manner commensurate with the value of the treatment. There is also negative mutuality: when employees receive undue treatment, they would return with negative behaviors [15]. Therefore, employees are likely to display workplace deviant behaviors after encountering abusive supervision. In addition, the theory of uncertainty management [16] can also explain the stimulus for employees to demonstrate deviant behavior after encountering abusive supervision. According to this theory, one of the major life challenges to an individual is the uncertainty in his/her social relationships. The uncertainty threatens the self-perception of the individual [17.]; the individual must be assured more ease of control cognitively [16], or will have to ignore this threat [17]. In the environment of abusive supervision, because of losing control, employees perceive uncertainty at very high level. In order to maintain control over the environment, the employees usually display negative behavior oriented toward the organization. Mitchell and Ambrose [13] proposed that employees respond to abusive supervision with different types of deviant behaviors: those directly against the supervisors, those oriented to the organization, and those oriented to other individuals.

Based on the above discussions, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision positively (in the same direction) affect employees' workplace deviant behaviors.

Hypothesis 1a: Abusive supervision positively affect employees' workplace deviant behaviors oriented to personnel – supervisors.

Hypothesis 1b: Abusive supervision positively affect employees' workplace deviant behaviors oriented to personnel – coworkers.

Hypothesis 1c: Abusive supervision positively affect employees' workplace deviant behaviors oriented to the organization.

1.2 The Mediation of Leadership Justice

In consideration of the characteristics of Chinese culture, Liu et al [18] proposed leadership justice as part of organizational justice for Chinese employees. Leadership justice can be seen as part of interpersonal justice in interactional justice that was proposed by western researchers. Interactional justice is employees' perception of the quality of personal treatment in execution of procedures [18] [19]. It reflects the justice of the interpersonal dimension, and is closely related to abusive supervision. Interactional justice represents the quality of "exchange" between supervisors and subordinates. The lower exchange quality would strengthen the aggression or offense oriented to supervisors [24]. Greenberg [20] held that interactional justice includes interpersonal justice and informational justice. Interpersonal justice reflects the extent employees are respected and treated with courtesy; while informational justice is the extent information is disseminated to employees. Bies and Moag [19] put forth that employees perceived supervisors as unjust when they felt the latter did not respect them and were not sincere with them. When employees face abusive supervision, they will perceive the unjust of the organization or the supervisors. When employees experience such unjust, they had inner drive to solve this unjust, through various methods, among which are

workplace deviant behaviors. In the Chinese context, He [31] held that interpersonal interactional justice between leaders and employees would better predict the performance in Chinese organizations. Liu's study [18] also reach very similar conclusion.

Based on the above discussions, we hereby propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Abusive supervision negatively affects employees' perception of leadership justice.

Hypothesis 3: Employees' perception of leadership justice negatively affects employees' workplace deviant behaviors.

Hypothesis 4: Leadership justice is a mediator in abusive supervision's affecting workplace deviant behaviors.

Hypothesis 4a: Leadership justice is a mediator in abusive supervision's affecting interpersonal-oriented deviant behaviors – oriented to leaders.

Hypothesis 4b: Leadership justice is a mediator in abusive supervision's affecting interpersonal-oriented deviant behaviors – oriented to coworkers.

Hypothesis 4c: Leadership justice is a mediator in abusive supervision's affecting organizational oriented deviant behaviors.

2 RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Subjects

The subjects of this study were employees from wide variety of industries from seven Chinese provinces. This study adopted networked-based, anonymous survey method. 140 usable questionnaires were collected. We also used email to distribute 120 questionnaires, and obtained 100 84 usable returns. The two methods generated 224 usable returns.

2.2 Research Instruments

This study involved three variables: abusive supervision, leadership justice, and employee workplace deviant behaviors. The variables were measured using the following instruments adapted from the instruments of Tepper [9], Yan [32], Liu et al [18], Bennett and Robinson [1], Mitchell and Ambrose [13]. The instruments had Cronbach's α values ranging from 0.902 to 0.965.

3 DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Our data analysis found that the mean value of abusive supervision in the workplace in China was 2.12, with standard deviation of 0.703, higher than the abusive supervision mean value of 1.38 in Western context [9]. We also fund that abusive supervision had a positive correlation with all three components of the workplace deviant behaviors: organization-oriented deviance, interpersonal deviance – leader-oriented, and interpersonal deviance – coworker-oriented. On the other hand, leadership justice was seen having significant negative correlation with abusive supervision and employee workplace deviant behaviors.

Our regression analysis showed that abusive supervision positively affected the leader-oriented component of interpersonal-oriented deviant behaviors; it also positively affected the coworker-oriented component of interpersonal-oriented deviant behaviors, and positively affected the organization-oriented deviant behaviors. Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c were accepted. We also found that leadership justice negatively affected the three components of workplace deviant behaviors. Hypothesis 3 was accepted. Hypothesis 2 was also accepted: Abusive supervision negatively affects leader justice perceived by employees. Hypotheses 4a and 4c were partially supported. Hypothesis 4b was not supported.

4 DISCUSSION

This study examined abusive supervision's effect on employee workplace deviant behavior, as well as the mediating role the perceived leadership justice might play.

The empirical study presents the results that indicate abusive supervision positively relates to employee workplace deviant behavior; i.e., the more an employee perceives abusive supervision, the more this employee would tend to display deviant behaviors. The finding is consistent with those of Tepper who conducted their studies in Western cultural environment. Among other relationships, interpersonal-oriented, leader-oriented deviant behaviors had an even closer relationship with abusive supervision, which agreed with those findings by Mitchell and Ambrose [13]. Our study also found that in the China data, mean value of abusive supervision was 2.12, much higher than the Western organizational context (1.38, [9]), this should alarm the Chinese top-level managers that abusive supervision is more common in china than in the West.

The results of this study also show that leadership justice possesses mediating roles between abusive supervision and two of the three dimension of workplace deviant behaviors: interpersonal-oriented, leader-oriented, and organization-oriented; yet the leadership justice does not have mediating effect when it comes the interpersonal-oriented, coworker-oriented dimension. On the one hand, employees encountered abusive supervision had a lowered perception of leadership justice which lead to employees' deviant behaviors that were oriented toward leaders and the organization. But empirical study proved that the mediating role was only partial, therefore other variables should be explored. On the other hand, leadership justice did not provide mediating role between abusive supervision and interpersonal-oriented, coworker-oriented deviant behaviors.

Implication of the Results

Firms today face tremendous challenges to their survival in the wake of global competitions. Firms must be alert on the hidden losses, and closely monitor employees' workplace deviant behavior, lower possible organizational costs, reduce the possible damage to employees' physical and mental health, so as to improve their competitiveness. The study sowed that abusive supervision would increase employees' workplace deviant behaviors. Therefore, organizations must be fully aware of the threat and damages of abusive supervision. Organizations should then establish complete and functioning mechanisms to identify, and get involved, to prevent abusive supervision from happening. We have also seen, in this study, that employees, when perceived unjust, would display deviant behavior to cancel the feeling of unjust. Organizations, then, must make great effort to create a just and fair organizational culture, create a harmonic and friendly organizational atmosphere, to reduce employees' feeling of unjust. Organizations should also establish open and functioning employee feedback channel, to let the employees to let out their complaints and other negative emotions.

Limitations of the Study

Firstly, although the instruments have been widely used in china, some contents in China showed certain unfit-ness. Measurement tools developed in china and just for Chinese subjects should help to obtain data that more fits to and thus better explain the situation in China. Secondly, the research employed a panel method, but both abusive supervision and workplace deviant behaviors are dynamic and changing, and abusive supervision's effect on employees' behaviors would not be instantaneous. The future studies may consider using conducting longitudinal method.

REFERENCES are available from the first author upon request.