

Abusive Supervision and Counterproductive Work Behavior: Moderating Effect of Negative Affectivity

Feng An, Bing Wang

School of Business Administration, University of Science & Technology Liaoning, Anshan, China
Email: af218@126.com, liaoningkdwb@163.com

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Abstract

In this study, the methods of literature study and questionnaire research are used with foreign mature scale analysis technique. Employees in manufacturing enterprises are surveyed for data collection. Based on 321 valid questionnaires with correlation analysis and linear regression method, effective data collection is achieved and aimed to explore the relationship among abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior and negative affectivity of the employees. The results showed: abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior of employees has a significant positive correlation; negative affectivity of employees is an intermediary variable. The significance of the survey in practice is to encourage leaders of enterprises to improve their strategy of management and pay more attention to the mental health of the employees.

Keywords

Abusive Supervision, Counterproductive Work Behavior, Negative Affectivity, Moderating Effect

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the development of the society, people are getting deeper understandings of the concept of management. Researchers devote their effort not only in studying positive aspects of management such as the sense of responsibility and supportive organization, but also in studying negative behaviors like abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior. Abusive supervision is a common phenomenon in practical enterprise management. Research has shown that abusive supervision such as using insulting words, despite and scorn will negatively affect the mental health of employees [1]. This leads to the decrease of the efficiency and satisfaction level of the employees and the increase of separation rate. In some extreme cases, employees would

even take retaliatory action to the enterprise. Therefore, studying the relationship among abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior and negative affectivity has become necessary and significant in improving management strategies and promoting the working attitude of employees.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. Concept Definition

- **Abusive Supervision.** The term “abusive supervision” is first used by Tepper (2000). It is used to describe hostile behaviors of employers that employees can perceive, including continuous insulting words and behaviors, but excluding physical contact [2]. At present, this definition is still in use. Specific behaviors include humiliating employees, blaming employees to shift responsibility etc. Research has shown that abusive supervision does harm to efficiency of the organization. It is negatively correlated to the satisfaction level of employees, organizational citizenship behavior [3], organizational commitment and voice behavior [4] [5]. Abusive supervision is also positively correlated to the resistance, aggressive behavior and deviant behavior of employees [6].
- **Counterproductive Work Behavior.** Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is one of the negative responses of employees to abusive supervision [7]. Typical counterproductive work behavior including intentionally making mistakes, wasting time and money, decreasing productivity, disobeying orders, hindering other colleagues and even stealing from the company. Counterproductive work behavior is defined in many ways by many researchers, including organization attack (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Spector, 1975), audacious behavior (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), anti-social behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), workplace deviant behaviors (Hollinger, 1986; Robinson & Bennett, 1995) and vindictive act (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997) [8].
- **Negative Affectivity.** Negative affectivity is defined to be emotional situation caused by pressure and unpleasant environment, including anger, aversion, guilt, fear and tension by Watson & Tellegen (1988). Watson’s study has shown that negative affectivity is usually positively correlated to pressure, bad working performance, health problem and unpleasant feelings [9].

2.2. Research Hypothesis

- **Relationship Between Abusive Supervision and Counterproductive Work Behavior**

According to social exchange theory, reciprocity rule is most important in exchange. When employees receive respect, they will repay with higher level of organizational citizenship behavior and organizational commitment [10]. On the contrary, the study of Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005) has shown that aggressive behavior of employees is likely to be caused by abusive supervision [11]. Because there is a gap between the status and powers of the employees and their managers, tit for tat is not likely to be achieved. The study of Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy (2002), Tepper (2001) has shown that retaliation of employees will not stop abusive supervision but raise the anger of employers and thus increase the level of abusive supervision [12] Based on this theory, employees tend to choose mild and sneaky ways to retaliate abusive supervision, which is counterproductive work behavior [13]. When employees realized their resistance cannot stop abusive supervision, they tend to take harmful actions to the organization. So we have the following hypothesis:

H1: Abusive supervision has a positive correlation with counterproductive work behavior of employees.

- **Relationship Between Negative Affectivity and Counterproductive Work Behavior**

Hochschild (1983) has proposed Emotional Labor theory and defined Emotional Labor to be the management of individuals’ emotions to create facial expressions and body behaviors that public could acknowledge [14]. The concept has raised great attention in academic world. Although differences exist in definitions, it is commonly approved that emotional labor is the management of emotions in order to fit the organization’s expectation.

Hoschild (1983) suggested that emotional labor has three types: Surface, active deep and passive deep. Accordingly, there are three types of affectivities: emotional dissonance, emotional harmony and emotional deviance. Emotional dissonance means the individual emotion fits the standard but do not reflect individual’s true feeling. Emotional harmony is individual emotion is truly in the way that the organization expected. Emotional deviance is individuals express their feelings without caring about the organization. When emotional dissonance

or emotional deviance occurs due to pressure or other factors, negative emotions will accumulate and working efficiency will be affected. In this way, counterproductive work behavior of employees will be caused. So we have the following hypothesis:

H2: Negative affectivity of employees is positively correlated to counterproductive work behavior.

- Moderating Effect of Negative Affectivity

The study of Penny & Spector (2005) has shown that employees with higher level of negative affectivity is more likely to react to small setback and stimulation, which leads to anger, worry, guilt and frustration [15]. The study of Chen & Spector (1991), Jex & Beehr (1991) has pointed out that employees with higher level of negative affectivity are more pessimistic. When encountering pressure, employees with higher level of negative affectivity are more likely to take counterproductive work behavior while employees with lower level of negative affectivity tend to comfort themselves instead of resist. The studies of Aquino (1999), Douglas & Martinko (2001), Skarlicki (1999) all have shown that counterproductive work behavior is more likely to occur in individuals with higher level of negative affectivity. Thus we can come up with the hypothesis:

H3: Negative affectivity has a moderating effect between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior.

3. Sample and Methods

3.1. Sample

In this research, survey on employees from 4 manufacturing companies is conducted. A mature scale from foreign country is used in the survey, focusing on abusive supervision (15 questions), counterproductive work behavior (33 questions), negative affectivity (10 questions). 400 questionnaires are delivered and 362 (90.5%) are recycled. 321 (80.3%) of the questionnaires are effective. The demographic characteristics of the sample is shown in Table 1.

3.2. Scale Reliability and Correlation of Variables

The scale used in this research is commonly used in foreign studies. It is also proved to be effective in studies taking place in China. The correlation of the variables is analyzed and the Reliability is tested using the scale in this research.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

| Demographic characteristics | Sample | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|--------|------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 145 | 45.2% |
| Female | 176 | 54.8% |
| Age | | |
| ≤25 | 65 | 20.2% |
| 26 to 35 | 161 | 50.2% |
| ≥36 | 95 | 29.6% |
| Level of education | | |
| Degrees under college | 169 | 52.6% |
| Bachelor degrees | 139 | 43.3% |
| Master degrees or above | 13 | 4.1% |
| Working years | | |
| ≤5 years | 111 | 34.6% |
| 6 - 15 years | 104 | 32.4% |
| 15 - 25 years | 79 | 24.6% |
| ≥26 years | 27 | 8.4% |

- Scale Reliability

The result of reliability test of abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior and negative affectivity is shown in **Table 2**.

We can see that the coefficient of internal consistency is more than 0.8 among the 3 variables, which suggests its reliability.

3.3. Regression Analysis

- Correlation of Variables

The correlation among Abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior and negative affectivity is analyzed and the result is shown in **Table 3**.

In **Table 3** we can see the correlation coefficient among abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior and negative affectivity and reached some conclusions:

Abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior is positively correlated. The correlation is statistically significant. ($r = 0.396, p < 0.01$). Hypothesis H1 is supported.

Negative affectivity and counterproductive work behavior is positively correlated. The correlation is statistically significant. ($r = 0.396, p < 0.01$). Hypothesis H2 is supported.

By the analysis above, it is proved that the three variables are correlated; however, the evidence is not enough to confirm the causal relationship. Therefore, regression analysis is used in the following paragraph for further analysis.

- Regression Analysis of Abusive Supervision and Counterproductive Work Behavior

Based on previous analysis, Hierarchical Regression is used to analyze the effect of abusive supervision on counterproductive work behavior. Gender, age, working years and level of education are supposed to affect counterproductive work behavior and considered as control variables. Abusive supervision is considered to be independent variable and counterproductive work behavior is the dependent variable. In the first step we set up a regression model that includes only the dependent variable and control variable, then we add in the dependent variable and get a new model. Comparing the two models, we get **Table 4**.

In **Table 4** we can see that the control variables are not significantly affected by control variables. Only 3.9% of the difference is explained by control variables. After adding in the dependent variable, the Reliability of the model is significantly improved ($\beta = 0.000, p < 0.001, \Delta R^2 = 0.151$). The result has proved that hypothesis H1 is correct.

- The Relationship of Negative Affectivity and Counterproductive Work Behavior

Using the same method of hierarchical regression, we include the control variables in the first step and add negative affectivity as the dependent variable in the second step, we get **Table 5**.

As shown in **Table 5**, controlling demographics variables, negative affectivity significantly increases the accuracy of the model. ($\beta = 0.000, p < 0.001, \Delta R^2 = 0.140$) H2 is therefore proved.

Table 2. Scale reliability.

| Variables | Cronbach's alpha |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Abusive supervision | 0.93 |
| Counterproductive work behavior | 0.97 |
| Negative affectivity | 0.92 |

Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficient (N = 321).

| Variables | Abusive supervision | Counterproductive work behavior | Negative affectivity |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Abusive supervision | 1 | | |
| Counterproductive work behavior | 0.396** | 1 | |
| Negative affectivity | 0.228** | 0.379** | 1 |

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Regression analysis of abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior.

| Variables | Dependent variables: Counterproductive work behavior | |
|-------------------------|--|----------|
| | Model1 | Model2 |
| Control variable | | |
| Sex | 0.110 | 0.117 |
| Age | 0.115 | 0.136 |
| Working years | 0.184 | 0.202 |
| Level of education | 0.309 | 0.253 |
| Independent variables | | |
| Abusive supervision | | 0.000*** |
| R ² | 0.039 | 0.189 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.015 | 0.164 |
| ΔR^2 | 0.039 | 0.151*** |
| F | 1.647 | 7.573*** |

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, $n = 321$.

Table 5. Relationship analysis of negative affectivity and counterproductive work behavior.

| Variables | Dependent variables: Counterproductive work behavior | |
|-------------------------|--|----------|
| | Model1 | Model12 |
| Control variable | | |
| Sex | 0.176 | 0.421 |
| Age | 0.310 | 0.287 |
| Working years | 0.446 | 0.379 |
| Level of education | 0.127 | 0.066 |
| Independent variables | | |
| Negative affectivity | | 0.000*** |
| R ² | 0.033 | 0.174 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.009 | 0.148 |
| ΔR^2 | 0.033 | 0.140*** |
| F | 1.400 | 6.804*** |

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, $n = 321$.

- Moderating Effect of Negative Affectivity

To test the moderating effect of negative affectivity between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior, we first set up the model including only the control variables: gender, age, working years and level of education. In the second step we include mean-centered coefficient of abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior. In the third step, the mean-centered interaction variable is also included. The result of the regression analysis is shown in **Table 6**.

From **Table 6** we can see negative affectivity has a moderating effect between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior ($\beta = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.140$, $F = 20.961$). Hypothesis H3 is proved.

Table 6. Moderating effect of negative affectivity between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior.

| Variables | Dependent variables: Counterproductive work behavior | | |
|--|--|----------|-----------|
| | Model1 | Model2 | Model3 |
| Control variable | | | |
| Sex | 0.165 | 0.377 | 0.089 |
| Age | 0.319 | 0.314 | 0.540 |
| Working years | 0.462 | 0.404 | 0.719 |
| Level of education | 0.133 | 0.060 | 0.054 |
| Independent variables | | | |
| Abusive supervision | | 0.000*** | 0.011** |
| Intervening variables | | | |
| Negative affectivity | | 0.000*** | 0.001** |
| Abusive supervision*Negative affectivity | | | 0.000*** |
| R ² | 0.033 | 0.262 | 0.480 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.010 | 0.234 | 0.457 |
| ΔR^2 | 0.033 | 0.229*** | 0.218*** |
| F | 1.400 | 9.465*** | 20.961*** |

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, $n = 321$.

4. Results

In the research, data is analyzed using the scale that has been properly tested. The correlation of abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior and negative affectivity is computed and tested using regression analysis. The hypothesis is proved. We have reached the following conclusions:

- Abusive supervision has a positive correlation with counterproductive work behavior of employees ($\beta = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.151$).
- Negative affectivity of employees is positively correlated to counterproductive work behavior ($\beta = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.140$).
- Negative affectivity has a Moderating Effect between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior ($\beta = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.140$, $F = 20.961$).

The conclusions also proved the previous theory of Fox (2001), Skarlicki (1999), which suggests Negative affectivity has a Moderating Effect between the source of pressure and counterproductive work behavior.

5. Management Advices

As Abusive Supervision leads to Negative Affectivity and Counterproductive Work Behavior of employees, it is necessary for managers to take actions to eliminate the negative effects of Abusive supervision in order to prevent loss of the enterprise.

- Pay Attention to the Harm of Abusive Supervision and Improve Management Method. As the research has shown the negative effects of abusive supervision, it is necessary to prevent any harm to the employees with insulting words and attitudes. Building a harmonious and pleasant working environment is helpful in maintaining the efficiency of the enterprise.
- Establishing Rules to Offer Help for the Employees. Enterprises should establish complaint department so that the employees can give feedback about their managers and report abusive supervision in an efficient way. Mental health care of employees should also be included in daily management. Providing necessary psychological counseling services for employees is an efficient way to eliminate the harm that abusive supervision causes to the enterprise.
- Improve Employee Service and Promoting Loyalty. Facing the fierce competition in human resource market, enterprises should take action to enhance mental contract with employees. The employees should share a

sense of responsibility to the enterprise even in difficult situations. To achieve this goal, human resource managers should improve employee service and care about the emotional feelings of employees. Mental comforting and psychological support should be provided to enable employees to work in a pleasant environment and contribute to the enterprise.

6. Deficiency of the Research

- The samples used in the article are from limited areas and only focused on manufacturing industry. The number of samples is also limited. Future research is advised to cover a wider area and collect more data.
- Although the research has shown a strong correlation between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behavior and negative affectivity of employees, the mechanism is still not explained in details and should be noticed in further study.

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