

## Inter-relationship between abusive supervision, distributive justice, intention to leave and workplace deviance: An affective process view

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The aim of the study is to develop a theoretical model to depict the relationship between abusive supervision, distributive justice, intention to leave and workplace deviance and the affective processes involved in them.

**Methodology:** A literature review of the relevant variables was done.

**Results:** The literature review indicated that though strong interrelationships exist both between the variables being studied and the affective processes involved but as yet no theoretical model exists.

**Conclusion:** The study was successful in creating a theoretical model to show the inter relation between abusive supervision, distributive justice, intention to leave and workplace deviance and the role of subordinate's negative reciprocity belief, power distance perception and feeling of loss of control over circumstances.

**Keywords:** Abusive supervision, Distributive justice, Intention to leave, Workplace deviance, Negative reciprocity, Power distance, Reactance.

### Introduction

People are the main assets of an organisation and their commitment and loyalty is responsible for the success of any organisation. When any organisational factor adversely affects the feeling of wellbeing in the employees it also negatively affects the well being of the organisation. One of the major factors that has a major effect on the smooth running of the organisation is Abusive supervision.<sup>1</sup> Although, abusive supervision is latent in the organisation but it has far reaching negative impact.<sup>2</sup> It affects subordinate behaviour in relation to all major organisational variables. Abusive supervision has been studied from the perspective of justice, the most basic and obvious of which is distributive justice. Abusive supervision<sup>3</sup> and distributive justice<sup>4</sup> have both been an important cause behind employees' intention to leave the organisation, which carries an unhealthy cost for the organisation. Several researches have shown that employee deviance originates with abusive supervision.<sup>5</sup> Intention to leave also cause the reduction in Power distance between the Abusive supervisor and abused subordinate, with little fear of cost of retaliation, the subordinate often indulge in deviant behaviour in the workplace. Workplace deviance has been thought to be major problem in any organisation<sup>6</sup> Thus, it becomes imperative to study and understand the problem and the affective functions operating in its background, so that with better understanding it can be dealt with more efficiently in future.

### Review of Literature

#### Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision has most succinctly been defined by Tepper<sup>7</sup> as 'subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact'. This abusive behaviour originates from the misuse

of power and authority which is vested in a supervisor, and is used to mistreat the subordinate in a number of ways.<sup>8</sup>

This mistreatment can be of different kinds starting from outright intimidation, humiliation, ridicule, using derogatory names to withholding important information.<sup>9</sup> It can also take the form of supervisor stealing credit from subordinates, lying to them or giving silent treatment etc.<sup>7</sup>

A number of studies have been done on Abusive supervision<sup>7,10-12</sup> to examine its impact on subordinate behaviour. Several studies have shown that abusive supervision and subordinates' performance of workplace deviance are related.<sup>10,13-18</sup>

Empirical research has mostly examined abuse from the subordinate's perspective<sup>8,19,7,11,16</sup> as abusive supervision can only be a subjective assessment by the subordinate to measure counterproductive behaviour<sup>16,20-22</sup> by the supervisor.

The subordinates' perceptions of unfairness determine their response to abusive supervision.<sup>7</sup>

The power difference in the relation between supervisor and subordinate ensures that abusive supervision does not transform into a tit for tat retaliation spiral between the two, as thought of consequences does not let people retaliate overtly against actions of a powerful abuser.<sup>23</sup> So, in order to make their workplace circumstances align with their expectations<sup>8</sup> and regain the feeling of control over their circumstances, abused subordinates reduce actions that benefit the organization and its representatives.

The literature on Abusive supervision and Deviance has followed Justice and Reactance Theory. The Justice perspective towards Abusive supervision and Interpersonal and Organisational Deviance includes the Negative Reciprocity beliefs of the subordinate<sup>16</sup> and also suggests that subordinates retaliate against the perceived unfairness of the abusive supervisor's behaviour by reducing positive behaviour in the organisation.<sup>19,7</sup> Several researches have

suggested that employees who feel threatened in their workplace strive to preserve a sense of autonomy.<sup>24,25</sup> Reactance is an unpleasant motivational arousal experienced as a result of threat of or loss of carefree behaviours and it leads to the desire to regain control.<sup>24</sup> The reactance theory perspective towards abusive supervision and deviance also suggests that subordinates under abusive supervision feel little to no control on their situation, and to restore their autonomy reduce their organisational citizenship behaviours.<sup>11</sup>

### Workplace Deviance

Workplace deviance has been defined as behaviour which not only violates organizational norms but also deliberately harms the organization and/or its employees.<sup>26</sup> It is a recurring and costly problem in most organisations.<sup>26</sup>

Earlier research showed that majority of employees engaged in some or the other form of deviant behaviour.<sup>27-30</sup>

Interpersonal treatment is a major factor behind deviant behaviour of the subordinate in the workplace.<sup>31</sup> Tepper found that since abusive supervision adversely effects the perceptions of justice, it leads to workplace deviance.<sup>7</sup>

In face of abusive supervision, employees may respond by either directly retaliating against their source of abuse i.e. the supervisor or they may engage in displaced deviance by targeting the organization or other colleagues.<sup>16</sup> So, workplace deviance occurs mostly due to displaced aggression.<sup>16</sup> The primary reason for displaced aggression is that the source of abuse and injustice may not be available to retaliate against or the abused subordinate may sense that retaliating against the supervisor will not stop the abuse and may even lead to even more hostility on the instigator's part.<sup>10</sup>

In both these cases direct retaliation of the subordinate against abusive supervision is curbed<sup>32</sup> and revenge in form of deviance is directed to less powerful targets<sup>33</sup> like the co-workers or the organisation at large.

Following this line of thinking, Robinson and Bennett categorized workplace deviance into organizational and interpersonal deviance.<sup>34</sup>

### Distributive Justice

Equity theory of Adams suggest that individuals need to maintain a perception that their social world is just and predictable.<sup>35</sup> Adams first defined distributive justice by proposing that people assess the fairness of outcome distribution by comparing their contributions and outcomes against that of a referent.<sup>36-39</sup> It is expected that behaviour arising out of a feeling of inequity would be directed towards regaining the feeling of equity.<sup>35</sup> In case of individual's perception of inequity in face of abusive supervision, the attempt towards restoration of equity can take the form of deviance at interpersonal or organisational level.

Distributive injustice is an important reason behind employees committing theft, sabotage, or mutilation in the workplace because they feel that their just dues have not been received and the organization owes them.<sup>40</sup> This perceived

inequity is the major cause of property and production deviance by the employee in a variety of industries.<sup>41</sup>

Greenberg, however, reported that employees did not respond to insensitive and disrespectful personal treatment when they perceive justice in the final outcome.<sup>42</sup> Studies have also indicated that workplace deviance, arising out of the subordinate's desire for revenge or to feel in control of their circumstances, is higher in case of multiple unfair events.<sup>43,44</sup>

This leads the researcher to believe that distributive justice plays an important role in managing workplace deviance.

### Intention to Leave

Past researches have shown that intention to leave is a strong indicator of employee turnover.<sup>45,46</sup> A high turnover is a major problem for any organisation<sup>47</sup> as recruitment and training of new people costs the organisation in many ways.

According to Tepper abusive supervision increases turnover intention.<sup>7</sup> Negative experience of abusive supervision in the workplace makes the subordinates question whether they should continue in the organisation.<sup>3</sup>

Studies also show that in in case of low distributive justice employees chose to quit their job in order to end the inequity.<sup>48-50,4</sup>

Power distance is also an important factor in deciding the strength of relation between subordinate's intention to quit and his deviant behaviour in the workplace. Power distance refers to the degree to which individuals, groups, or societies accept that inequalities of power, status and wealth are unavoidable, legitimate, or functional.<sup>51</sup> This degree of acceptance of the inequality in power decides how individuals at different levels of power interact.<sup>52</sup> Higher power distance is associated with higher deference<sup>53</sup> while lower power distance will mean less deference towards authority figures.<sup>52</sup> The results of a Seminal study by Tepper et al. also indicated that abusive supervision is more strongly associated with subordinates' organization deviance and supervisor directed deviance when subordinates' intention to quit is higher.<sup>21</sup>

### Research Gap

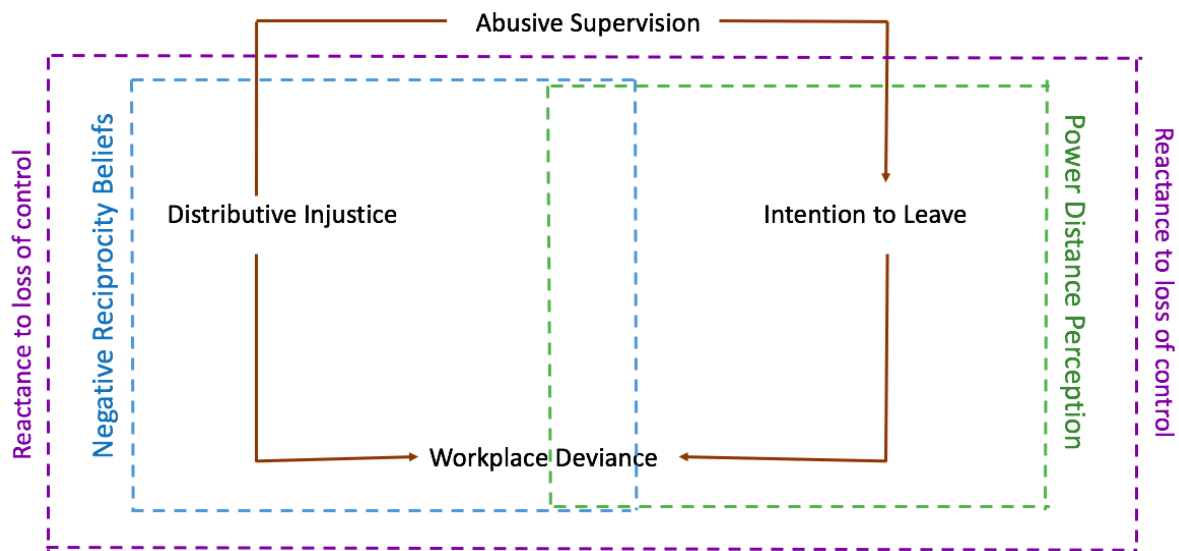
The literature review has shown the interrelationship between abusive supervision, distributive justice, intention to leave and workplace deviance. However, no conceptual model has been developed till date to comprehensively depict these relationships keeping in view the affective processes of the subordinate.

### Methodology

This is a conceptual paper which aims to put forward a theoretical model to depict the inter relationship between Abusive supervision, distributive justice, intention to leave and workplace deviance in conjugation with the affective process of the abused subordinate, as shown in Fig. 1.

## Results

The theoretical model to depict the inter relationship between abusive supervision, distributive justice, intention to leave and workplace deviance in conjunction with the affective process of the abused subordinate, is shown in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1:** Shows the inter relationship between abusive supervision, distributive justice, intention to leave and workplace deviance in view of Negative reciprocity beliefs, Power distance perception and Reactance to loss of control of the subordinate

Keeping in view the literature review presented in the previous section, Fig. 1 shows that Abusive supervision in combination with low distributive justice leads to either outright Workplace Deviance or a reduction in Organisational Citizenship behaviour. This happens with the background of well-established negative reciprocity beliefs of the abused subordinate.<sup>16</sup> This belief that any unjust and insensitive action of the supervisor has to be paid back in kind in some way ensures a strong positive relation between Abusive supervision, distributive injustice and deviance

Similarly, abusive supervision can make the employee question their desire to be part of the organisation, leading to an intention to quit their job. This leads to a decrease in power distance between the abusive supervisor and the abused subordinate, leading to more likelihood of him being deviant in the workplace.<sup>21</sup>

Since, abusive supervision leads the subordinate to perceive a loss of control over his circumstances, most of the response behaviour is motivated by the desire to regain control.<sup>11</sup>

All these affective processes of the subordinate have well established regions of overlap since they all occur in a person in response to a single stimuli of abusive supervision.

Understanding the affective process following Abusive supervision and the behavioural response originating from it, can go a long way in minimising damage to the organisation.

**Conflict of Interest:** None.

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