



# Evidence for a curvilinear relationship between abusive supervision and creativity in South Korea

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## ABSTRACT

Applying activation theory, this study examined the possibility of a curvilinear relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity. Using survey responses of 203 subordinate–supervisor dyads in South Korea, hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated a curvilinear (inverted U-shaped) relationship between a supervisor's abusive behaviors and an employee's creative performance. Specifically, employees exhibited more creativity when abusive supervision was at a moderate level rather than at very low or very high levels. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced business environment, one of the most important challenges for organizations is enhancing the creative capabilities of their employees (Hirst, Knippenberg, & Zhou, 2009). Studies have demonstrated that employee creativity contributes to organizational innovation, productivity, and survival (Zhou, 2003), and forms the basis of competitive advantage (Shalley & Gilson, 2004). Given the importance of employee creativity, empirical studies have investigated various facilitators of creativity, such as supervisor support, developmental feedback, and creative self-efficacy (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Tierney & Farmer, 2002; Zhou, 2003). Scholars have focused on the role of supervisors' behaviors as one of the important factors related to employee creativity (e.g., Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). As a representative of the organization and a major social and economic exchange partner in the workplace, a supervisor can play a key role in facilitating employee creativity (Shalley & Gilson, 2004). The focus of prior research on the effect of supervisors on creativity has predominantly centered on their positive or supportive role (George & Zhou, 2001; Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002; Zhou, 2003). For example, Amabile and colleagues (2004) found that supervisor support was positively related to the peer-rated creativity of subordinates working on creative projects in seven different companies.

Recently, organizational research has been increasingly focused on the “dark side of leadership” (e.g., Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Griffin & Lopez, 2005). An important reason for the current interest is the increase in frequency of destructive supervisor behaviors in the workplace (Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Hershcovis, 2011), and their considerable impact on organizational and individual outcomes (Aryee et al., 2007; Tepper, 2007). According to Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011), in the U.S., more than 13% of the workforce experienced abusive supervision or non-physical hostility over a 12 month period (Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006). In particular, abusive supervision, which refers to sustained forms of nonphysical hostility perpetrated by a supervisor against his/her subordinates (Tepper, 2000), has been considered an important factor that may impact employee attitudes and

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job performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007). Although supervisors often engage in demanding or abusive behaviors to rapidly enhance individual performance or to convey the importance of specific objectives to their employees (Campbell, White, & Durant, 2007; Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007; Zapf & Gross, 2001), little is known about the relationship between abusive supervision and creativity. Thus, in this study we investigate the effects of abusive supervision on creativity to enhance our understanding of the relationship between supervisor behaviors and creativity. Specifically, by applying activation theory (Gardner & Cummings, 1988; Scott, 1966), we posit a curvilinear relationship between abusive supervision and employee creativity.

We test our hypothesis using a sample of employees in a large public organization in South Korea. South Korea is characterized by a higher power distance and performance-oriented culture (Fukuyama, 1995; Hofstede, 1980). Supervisors from high power distance cultures expect their followers to be more obedient to and to accept their directive influence (Hofstede, 1980). Lower status followers in high power distance cultures believe that their supervisors' directives should be respected and shown deference, and so, such employees have a higher tolerance for unfair treatment from such authority figures (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Further, due to supervisors' high performance orientation, abusive behaviors have been shown to be relatively frequent in South Korea (Ashkanasy, 2002). These characteristics may lead followers to better deal with a moderate level of supervisors' abuse and to consider a low level of abusive supervision as being *laissez-faire*, that is, that the supervisor is uninvolved and detached from the activities of the employees. Therefore, our research context is well-suited for the study of the curvilinear relationship between abusive supervision and creativity. In summary, this study is designed to address an important research question: "How does abusive supervision influence employee creativity?" In order to answer this question, our study investigates the curvilinear relationship (inverted U-shaped form) between abusive supervision and creativity, applying activation theory (Gardner & Cummings, 1988; Scott, 1966). Thus, our study takes an important step toward developing a better understanding of how supervisors' behavior in general, and abusive supervision in particular, affect employee's creative performance.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Abusive supervision and employee creativity

There is substantial empirical evidence relating abusive supervision with subordinates' job dissatisfaction, turnover intentions, psychological distress, workplace deviance, and reduced organizational citizenship behaviors (Tepper, 2000). However, to the best of our knowledge, the effect of supervisors' abusive behaviors on employee creativity has not been examined. Based on activation theory (Gardner & Cummings, 1988; Scott, 1966), the present study argues that an inverted U-shape might best characterize the relationship between abusive supervision and creativity, which is defined as the generation of ideas, insights, or solutions that are novel and potentially useful for the organization (George & Zhou, 2001).

Activation theory posits that both very high and very low levels of activation are assumed to decrease performance, whereas moderate levels of activation are likely to lead to the best performance. In other words, individuals require an optimal level of activation for them to perform most effectively (Gardner & Cummings, 1988). As the experienced activation level deviates negatively or positively from the optimal activation level, performance is diminished. Because moderate activation levels help an individual to fully engage in a task, optimally use cognitive resources, and adjust one's emotions, an employee is likely to be more creative at intermediate levels of activation (Baer & Oldham, 2006). In contrast, a very low or a very high level of activation could lead to decreased task engagement or cognitive interference, which can hinder creative performance. Thus, individuals will be "optimally stimulated" and most creative when activation is at an intermediate level.

A limited number of studies have supported this stance. Onyemah (2008) demonstrated an inverted U-relationship between role stressors and performance. Based on a survey of 1290 salespeople, the author found that moderate levels of role stressors were associated with higher performance compared to performance at a very low or a very high level of stressors. These assertions were similar to the propositions of the Yerkes–Dodson law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) which describes an inverted U-shaped relationship between physiological arousal and performance. Janssen (2001) also demonstrated a curvilinear relationship between job demands and performance. Supporting activation theory, Janssen found that intermediate rather than low or high levels of job demands resulted in higher levels of job performance among managers. That is, an increase in the job demand level was beneficial for job performance up to a certain level; after reaching the optimal level of job demands, job performance started declining.

While prior research on the relationship between abusive supervision and creativity seems sparse, there is some evidence from research on related phenomena. Recently, in a meta-analysis regarding the effects of stressors on creative performance, Byron, Khazanchi, and Nazarian (2010) theorized that there was an inverted U-shaped relationship between creativity and social-evaluative threats, which occur "when an aspect of self is or can be negatively judged by others" (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004, p. 361). They suggested that the effect of stressors on creative performance may not simply be a function of the number of stress stimuli, but also can be dependent on the type of stress stimuli. In their meta-analysis of 76 experimental studies, they found a curvilinear relationship between evaluative stress and creativity. Their findings suggested that some evaluative stress motivates employees to be more creative, while too little or too much hinders creativity.

Previous studies have noted that a supervisor's abusive behaviors are a major source of stress in organizational settings (Harris et al., 2007; Tepper, 2007). Specifically, Tepper (2007) depicted abusive supervision as a stressful situation faced by an employee. As a source of workplace stress, abusive supervision can be considered a social-evaluative threat. Abusive supervision includes a

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