

# Coping with abusive supervision: The neutralizing effects of ingratiation and positive affect on negative employee outcomes

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## Abstract

We conducted a study to test the interactive effects of abusive supervision, ingratiation, and positive affect (PA) on strain (i.e., job tension and emotional exhaustion) and turnover intentions. We hypothesized that employees' use of ingratiation, when coupled with high levels of PA, would neutralize the adverse effects of abusive supervision on each outcome. Conversely, ingratiation tactics were hypothesized to have a detrimental influence on work outcomes in conditions of increased abusive supervision when employees' PA was low. Partial support was found for each hypothesis, with results indicating that low PA individuals who refrained from ingratiation experienced more strain and turnover intentions than other individuals. Implications of these results as well as strengths, limitations, and avenues for future research are discussed.

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## 1. Coping with abusive supervision: the neutralizing effects of ingratiation and positive affect on negative employee outcomes

Abusive supervision is a phenomenon that negatively affects a substantial number of organizations and their members. Recent research indicates that between 10% and 16% of American workers experience abusive supervision on a regular basis (Namie & Namie, 2000; Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, & Ensley, 2004). More alarmingly, media reports indicate that the frequency of such abuse has increased in recent years (e.g., Workplace bullies, 2005).

This trend is disconcerting given the array of undesirable subordinate outcomes, including turnover, stress, emotional exhaustion, and perceived injustice associated with abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000). Despite these serious consequences, our understanding of the effects of abusive supervision on individual reactions is fairly limited. Although the negative influence of abusive supervision has been observed in past research (i.e., a little is bad, more is

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worse; e.g., Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), less is currently known about potential moderators, especially with respect to factors that can mitigate the adverse effects of abusive supervision. Knowledge of such factors is important because, as Tepper (2000) noted, subordinates might frequently be reluctant to report abusive supervisors, but individual differences may allow some to cope with abusive supervision more effectively than others.

To this end, the goal of this study is to add to existing research on factors that can attenuate the negative influence of abusive supervision (e.g., Tepper, 2000; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001) by examining how ingratiation, combined with high levels of positive affect (PA), interacts with abusive supervision to influence job strain (tension and emotional exhaustion) and turnover intentions. We hypothesized that high PA individuals are able to more effectively use ingratiation tactics to reduce the negative influence of abusive supervision when compared to those with low levels of PA. This prediction is based on research (Castro, Douglas, Hochwarter, Ferris, & Frink, 2003; Forgas, 1998) indicating that PA can influence the effectiveness of social influence strategies such as ingratiation. To develop this argument, we begin with a review of pertinent research on abusive supervision.

## 2. Abusive supervision

Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as “the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (p. 178). Put differently, abusive supervision represents prolonged emotional or psychological mistreatment of subordinates. A variety of abusive supervisory behaviors have been identified, including ridiculing subordinates in front of others, withholding important information, and the use of disparaging language, threats, and intimidation tactics (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). It is important to note that isolated instances of these behaviors do not constitute abusive supervision (Neuman & Baron, 1997; Tepper, 2000). Instead, abusive supervisors are conceptualized as those who exhibit a sustained pattern of abuse on a regular basis over an extended period of time.

### 2.1. Consequences of abusive supervision

Tepper (2000) and Zellars et al. (2002) have argued that abusive supervisor behaviors are conceptually similar to behaviors such as petty tyranny, defined as the oppressive use of one’s power over another (Ashforth, 1994, 1997), and social undermining, which refers to behaviors that impair one’s ability to succeed at work (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). Research indicates that this class of behaviors is linked to a number of negative psychological outcomes such as helplessness (Ashforth, 1994, 1997), decreased self-efficacy (Duffy et al., 2002), and psychological distress (Richman, Flaherty, Rospenda, & Christensen, 1992). Other consequences include heightened levels of emotional exhaustion, perceived work–family conflict, turnover intentions, and decreased levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Ashforth, 1997; Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Tepper, 2000). These relationships may reflect the fact that abusive supervision can lead employees to feel that they are unfairly treated and can cause them to question their self-worth and abilities (e.g., Baron, 1988; Burton & Hoobler, 2006; Tepper, 2000).

Although all of the aforementioned outcomes are undesirable in nature, we focus specifically on job strain (i.e., tension and emotional exhaustion) and turnover intentions resulting from abusive supervision. Both tension and emotional exhaustion have been linked to undesirable outcomes such as job burnout and increased blood pressure (Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997; Zellars, Perrewé, & Hochwarter, 2000). Similarly, turnover intentions are an important consideration, given their impact on actual turnover behaviors (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000) and the costs of turnover, which, according to one estimate, can constitute as much as 5% of an organization’s operating budget (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000).

#### 2.1.1. Abusive supervision and tension

Job tension is defined as “the psychological reaction of workers to disturbances in the objective or perceived work environment” (Chrisholm, Kasl, & Eskenazi, 1983, p. 387). From a cognitive appraisal perspective (Lazarus, 1966), the relationship between abusive supervision and employee somatic tension (e.g., high blood pressure) can be explained by the supervisor’s level of recognized authority. That is, while mistreatment from a co-worker might be irritating, abuse from an individual with power over one’s career and self-image is likely to be deemed far more troubling. Additionally, the influence of abusive supervisor behaviors on factors such as perceived injustice, frustration, and helplessness is likely to promote tension among those in the dyadic relationship (Ashforth, 1997, Tepper, 2000).

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