



## Abusive supervision and work–family conflict: The path through emotional labor and burnout

Dawn Carlson <sup>a</sup>, Merideth Ferguson <sup>b,\*</sup>, Emily Hunter <sup>a</sup>, Dwayne Whitten <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Baylor University, Hankamer School of Business, Department of Management, One Bear Place #98007, Waco, TX 76798-8007, USA

<sup>b</sup> Utah State University, Jon M. Huntsman School of Business, Department of Management, 3555 Old Main Hill Logan, UT 84322, USA

<sup>c</sup> Texas A&M University, Mays Business School, Department of Information and Operations Management, Mailstop 4217, College Station, TX 77843, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Building on the theoretical foundations of conservation of resources theory, this research provides insights into the relationship of abusive supervision with work–family conflict (work-to-family and family-to-work). Further, it is the first attempt to incorporate the emotional labor to burnout link as the mediating process between abuse and conflict. Using a sample of 328 individuals working fulltime we examined both the direct relationship of abuse with conflict as well as the indirect relationship through surface acting (emotional labor) and burnout. Our results suggest that abusive supervision influences conflict and the relationship is partially mediated through the surface acting to burnout path.

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### 1. Introduction

Abusive supervision, a form of nonphysical aggression, is a reality of today's organization. Abusive supervision affects an estimated 13.6% of the U.S. workforce (Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006). Abusive supervision has been shown to impact aspects of the work domain, such as reduced job satisfaction (Tepper, 2000, 2007) and increased workplace deviance (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009).

While extant research on the effects of abusive supervision has largely focused on those within the organization, the fallout of abuse on the family has recently begun to garner attention. For instance, early research on the effect of abuse on subordinates' family lives found that abused subordinates are more likely to engage in acts of displaced aggression such as undermining family members (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Recent research demonstrated that being the target of an abusive supervisor is associated with greater tension in the marital or cohabiting relationship between the subordinate and a spouse or partner which then relates to poorer family functioning (Carlson, Ferguson, Perrewe, & Whitten, 2011). Building on the initial work of Tepper (2000) that linked abusive supervision with work–family conflict, abusive supervision has been found to also impact not only work-to-family conflict but also the family life of both the job incumbent and their partner (Carlson et al., 2011; Hoobler & Brass, 2006). However, what has not been examined is the process through which abusive supervision impacts both directions of work–family conflict (i.e., work-to-family and family-to-work) and whether this relationship is mediated by emotional labor and burnout.

Emotional labor, described as the management or alteration of emotion in carrying out job duties (Hochschild, 1983), is one possible mechanism through which this relationship might be understood. One type of emotional labor, surface acting, is characterized by outward displays of emotion that do not match the actor's true feelings, whereas deep acting occurs when employees aim to experience the emotions that are expected in their job (Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting has been found to

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [dawn\\_carlson@baylor.edu](mailto:dawn_carlson@baylor.edu) (D. Carlson), [merideth.ferguson@usu.edu](mailto:merideth.ferguson@usu.edu) (M. Ferguson), [Emily\\_m\\_hunter@baylor.edu](mailto:Emily_m_hunter@baylor.edu) (E. Hunter), [dwhitten@mays.tamu.edu](mailto:dwhitten@mays.tamu.edu) (D. Whitten).

result in harmful outcomes such as diminished quality of work life, job satisfaction and health as well as increased burnout (Beal, Trougakos, Weiss, & Green, 2006; Bono & Vey, 2005; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Cheung & Tang, 2009; Grandey, 2003; Naring, Briet, & Brouwers, 2006).

In addition, surface acting is positively associated with work–family conflict both from family to work and from work to family (Cheung & Tang, 2009; Montgomery, Panagopolou, & Benos, 2005; Montgomery, Panagopolou, de Wildt, & Meenks, 2006; Seery, Corrigan, & Harpel, 2008; Yanchus, Eby, Lance, & Drollinger, 2010). This relationship is believed to exist as surface acting actively creates dissonance between felt and displayed emotions by modulating emotional responses or faking emotional expression (Grandey, 2000). Further, surface acting is very effortful and as such may deplete valuable resources (Beal et al., 2006; Grandey, 2003). Research has yet to conceptualize the role that emotional labor may play in the effects of abusive supervision on the target's experience of work–family conflict. We propose that surface acting while at work in response to abusive supervision will deplete resources leading to increased burnout and subsequently increased work–family conflict.

Our contribution to the abusive supervision and work–family literature is two-fold. First, while prior research has linked abusive supervision to broad measures of work–family conflict (Tepper, 2000) and to the work-to-family direction of conflict (Carlson et al., 2011), this study is the first to meaningfully theorize and test the *process* through which abusive supervision leads to both directions of work–family conflict (i.e., work-to-family and family-to-work). Second, while prior research notes the association between abuse and emotional exhaustion (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Wu & Hu, 2009), the present study is the first to link the subordinate's experience of abusive supervision with their attempts at emotional labor at work and to study how those attempts lead to burnout as well as both work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict. Understanding how abuse may lead to work–family conflict is important in that conflict is known to lead to poor outcomes in both the work and family domains. For instance, work-to-family conflict positively relates to job productivity loss (Johns, 2011), relationship tension between marital or romantic partners (Carlson et al., 2011), heightened stress (Judge & Colquitt, 2004) and increased alcohol use (Wang, Liu, Zhan, & Shi, 2010), whereas family-to-work conflict positively relates to absenteeism (Johns, 2011). In understanding these processes, researchers and organizational leaders can better identify intervention opportunities to prevent abuse from heightening the subordinate's experience of work–family conflict.

## 2. Conceptual foundations

Abusive supervision is defined as “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which leaders engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Examples of abusive supervision are rudeness, tantrums, public criticism, and inconsiderate action (Bies, 2001). Abusive supervision and other forms of workplace aggression have a variety of stress-related outcomes and are recognized as a potential source of stress for the victim (Keashly, Hunter, & Harvey, 1997; Tepper, 2000). In a recent review, abusive supervision has been shown to impact attitudes, employee resistance, psychological distress, aggression and deviance, performance contributions, and family well-being (Tepper, 2007).

It appears that the experience of abusive supervision has a profound effect on the subordinate's life both at work and outside of work. Research indicates abusive supervision and its impact are so encompassing that the experience shapes the subordinate's view of the world and leads to significant loss of resources. Abused subordinates may experience a loss of self-esteem (Burton & Hoobler, 2006) and growing evidence indicates that the distress resulting from abuse (Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011) often leads to the subordinate engaging in undermining behaviors in the family domain (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). The fallout from abusive supervision appears to have an expansive impact and result in resource loss throughout many areas of the subordinate's life. Thus, we use conservation of resources (COR) theory to hypothesize the process through which abusive supervision leads to both directions of work–family conflict.

COR theory suggests that people strive to obtain and maintain resources that help to further their goals, and experienced stress results from an actual or threatened loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). According to COR theory, the threat of or actual loss of resources is the chief element of the stress process. Hobfoll (2001) articulated that resources can come in the form of conditions, personal characteristics, objects and energies. When a loss or threat of a loss occurs then people are motivated to engage in efforts to avoid further loss. Prior research often uses COR theory to investigate the management of stress in the workplace. For instance, researchers employed COR theory to investigate the relationships between display rules, surface and deep acting, and burnout (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002), and the effects of role stress and workload on emotional exhaustion (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Furthermore, Westman and Etzion (2001) used COR theory in studying the effects of vacations and respite on perceived job stress, burnout and absenteeism. It is commonly held that the loss of resources can be cumulative as stressors pile up. After initial losses, fewer resources are available for stress resistance; hence, the individual is less resilient and more vulnerable to stressors. For example, a study of police officers found that those who experienced a high level of psychological strain at the beginning of their shift were more likely to experience emotional dissonance and subsequent additional psychological strain toward the end of their shift (a future loss), indicative of a loss spiral (van Gelderen, Heuven, van Veldhoven, Zeelenberg, & Croon, 2007). COR theory builds on the notion of role stress and has been viewed as an appropriate foundation for understanding the work family interface as work–family conflict is believed to lead to negative outcomes because of the stress of resources lost (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Witt & Carlson, 2006).

Using COR theory as our foundation, we theorize that abused subordinates will engage in surface acting in response to the abuse which requires use, and thus loss, of resources. The loss of resources through surface acting will lead to subordinate burnout in that the subordinate will have fewer resources available for stress resistance. Consequently, subordinate burnout will make the

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