



# When do subordinates' emotion-regulation strategies matter? Abusive supervision, subordinates' emotional exhaustion, and work withdrawal<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon conservation of resources theory, this research examines the linkage between abusive supervision and work withdrawal from a stress perspective, focusing on the moderating role of subordinates' emotion-regulation strategies and the mediating role of emotional exhaustion. Survey data included 254 ranked officers in 55 workgroups of the Taiwan Ministry of National Defense. The HLM results suggest that subordinates' emotional exhaustion mediated the relationship between abusive supervision and work withdrawal only when subordinates engaged in high-frequency expressive suppression or low-frequency cognitive reappraisal. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, scholars have paid increasing attention to the study of tyrannical and abusive managerial behaviors and the potential negative consequences of such behaviors in organizations (Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2011; Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007; Tepper, 2000, 2007; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008). Tepper (2000, p. 178) refers to such behaviors as “abusive supervision,” which he defines as “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact.” It is generally believed that abused subordinates should experience elevated psychological distress, such as anxiety, depression, job strain, and burnout (see Tepper, 2007, for a review). However, as Tepper noted, abusive supervision may not influence all subordinates in the same way. For instance, subordinates' upward maintenance communication strategies could make abusive supervision more or less threatening to them (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). Waldron (1991) has proposed that subordinates' emotion-regulation efforts could be a way of maintaining acceptable relationships with their supervisors. Nevertheless, how subordinates use emotion-regulation strategies under circumstances of abusive supervision remains unexamined. Since emotion regulation has been suggested to powerfully shape which emotions people experience in a given situation (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Gross, 1999), an emotion-regulation approach should be useful in the investigation of abusive supervision.

Gross (1998) proposed two common emotion-regulation strategies associated with stress coping: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. The former has been referred to as an antecedent-focused emotional-regulation strategy, conceptualized

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as an individual's efforts to construct a potentially emotion-eliciting situation in a way that changes its emotional impact (John & Gross, 2004; Liu, Prati, Perrewé, & Brymer, 2010). As an example, an applicant might view a university admissions interview as an opportunity to find out how much he likes the school rather than as a test of his worth (Gross & John, 2003). By contrast, expressive suppression has been referred to as a response-focused emotion-regulation strategy, defined as the conscious inhibition of one's ongoing emotionally expressive behaviors (John & Gross, 2004; Liu et al., 2010); for instance, one might maintain a neutral expression while holding a great hand during a poker game. Gross and John (2003) found evidence that people differ in their habitual use of emotion-regulation strategies. Therefore, in this study, we seek to understand how these two strategies influence the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinates' psychological distress through experiences of emotional exhaustion (i.e., feelings of being emotionally overwhelmed and drained by work) (Leiter & Maslach, 1988).

According to Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001, p. 403), "Exhaustion is not something that is simply experienced – rather, it prompts actions to distance oneself emotionally and cognitively from one's work." Past studies have shown that emotionally exhausted employees are more likely than other employees to withdraw from their work environment (e.g., Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Westman & Eden, 1997). It is possible that supervisors' abusive behaviors lead to subordinates' work-withdrawal behaviors, at least in part because abusive supervision enhances subordinates' feelings of emotional exhaustion. Hence, we investigate whether emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role in the relationship between abusive supervision and work withdrawal.

Conceptualizing abusive supervision as a workplace stressor that causes employees to lose valued personal resources (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008), we develop and test our model using the conservation of resources (COR) theory of stress developed by Hobfoll (1989). The COR theory provides an overarching framework for explaining the stress process and its importance in the abusive supervision–work withdrawal link. Thus, our research contributes to the abusive supervision literature in two ways. First, we seek to advance the abusive supervision literature through an understanding of the role of employees' emotion-regulation strategies to identify the boundary conditions of the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion. Second, we build a mediated-moderation model that explains the conditions under which abusive supervision is related to work withdrawal. Fig. 1 presents a research framework of proposed relationships among this study's primary variables.

## 2. Theoretical development and hypotheses

### 2.1. Abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion

Based on the COR theory, individuals seek to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, including emotional resources, and minimize the threat of resource loss (Hobfoll, 2002). When individuals chronically work under stressful circumstances triggered by interpersonal interactions, they may experience low energy and mental fatigue. The resulting emotional exhaustion depletes the coping resources individuals need to meet emotional demands in the workplace (Maslach et al., 2001). Once their resources have been depleted and they fail to generate additional resources, they are likely to experience psychological distress (Tepper, 2000; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

Subordinates are likely to report higher levels of emotional exhaustion at work when they are chronically mistreated by their supervisors. Perceptions of abusive supervision impose significant emotional demands on subordinates' resources and prevent them from regaining resources through reasonable, pleasant interactions with their supervisors, thus leading to a loss of valued resources and a need for additional coping resources. Emotional exhaustion may occur because of an imbalance between the emotional demands of abusive supervision and the resources available to meet such demands. Studies also have shown that abusive supervision is positively associated with psychological distress (Tepper, 2000, 2007; Wu & Hu, 2009). We therefore expect that subordinates who are abused by their supervisors are likely to experience heightened emotional exhaustion at work.

### 2.2. The moderating role of emotion-regulation strategies

We expect that the impact of abusive supervision on subordinates' emotional exhaustion varies with subordinates' ability to cope with the underlying stress. Researchers have suggested that individuals differ in the extent to which they regulate their emotions when facing stressors and that these emotion-regulation tendencies affect how they respond to stressful circumstances

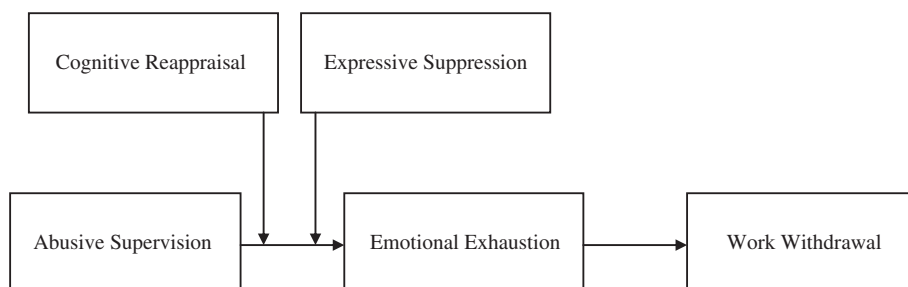


Fig. 1. Research framework.

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