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Original article

## The relationship between abusive supervision, distributive justice and job satisfaction: A substitutes for leadership approach

*Le rapport entre la supervision abusive, la justice distributive et la satisfaction au travail : une approche des substituts du leadership*

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** – Recently, interest in abusive supervision has grown (Tepper, 2007). However, little is still known about organizational factors that can reduce the adverse effects of abusive supervision.  
**Objective.** – Based on a substitute for leadership perspective (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), we predict that job resources adequacy and role clarity act as buffers in the negative relationship between abusive supervision, distributive justice and job satisfaction.  
**Method.** – A sample of 253 employees from a City Hall was used to test our hypotheses.  
**Results.** – We found that abusive supervision was significant and negatively related to distributive justice when job resources adequacy and role clarity were low, but not when job resources adequacy and role clarity were high, with consequences for job satisfaction.  
**Conclusions.** – These findings suggest that job resources adequacy and role clarity can reduce the negative impact of abusive supervision, which then lessens distributive unfairness perceptions and job dissatisfaction.

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### R É S U M É

**Introduction.** – Récemment, l'intérêt pour la supervision abusive a augmenté (Tepper, 2007). Cependant, on dispose de très peu d'informations sur les facteurs organisationnels qui peuvent réduire les effets néfastes de la supervision abusive.  
**Hypothèse.** – À partir de la perspective des substituts du leadership (Kerr et Jermier, 1978), nous prévoyons que l'adéquation des ressources du travail et la clarté des rôles agissent comme modérateurs dans le rapport négatif entre la supervision abusive, la justice distributive et la satisfaction au travail.  
**Méthode.** – Un échantillon composé par 253 employés d'un Conseil municipal a été utilisé pour tester nos hypothèses.  
**Résultats.** – Nous avons constaté que la supervision abusive présente un rapport significatif et négatif avec la justice distributive lorsque l'adéquation des ressources du travail et la clarté des rôles sont faibles, mais pas lorsque l'adéquation des ressources du travail et la clarté des rôles sont élevés, avec des conséquences sur la satisfaction au travail.  
**Conclusions.** – Ces résultats suggèrent que l'adéquation des ressources du travail et la clarté des rôles peuvent réduire l'impact négatif de la supervision abusive, ce qui réduit ainsi la perception d'injustice distributive et l'insatisfaction au travail.

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In the last dozen years, research interest in the destructive side of leadership has grown due to the potential negative consequences of such behaviors in organizations, including organizational costs, as well as negative personal outcomes (Aasland,

Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010). The most studied negative workplace supervisor behavior is abusive supervision, because although it is a low base-rate phenomenon, there is evidence that its effects are noteworthy (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). It is defined as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178).

This definition includes several features. Firstly, it presupposes a continuing exposure to abusive behavior. Supervisors engage in abuse behaviors for a purpose (e.g. to elicit high performance or to send the message that mistakes will not be tolerated) and abusive supervisors may mistreat their subordinates to accomplish objectives other than causing injury (Tepper, 2007). Secondly, abusive supervision refers to behaviors that reflect indifference, as well as hostility (Tepper, 2000). Finally, abusive supervision consists of a subjective assessment and depends on subordinates’ perceptions of abuse and may be colored by characteristics of the observer and/or subordinate (e.g. personality, demographic profile) and of the context in which the assessment is made (e.g. the work environment, coworker perceptions). Overall, abusive supervision represents prolonged emotional or psychological mistreatment of subordinates from behaviors, such as taking undue credit, assigning blame inappropriately, ridiculing subordinates publicly, withholding important information or using disparaging language, threats, and intimidation tactics (e.g. Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter & Kacmar, 2007; Tepper, 2000; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006).

Abusive supervision has been related to several negative outcomes, including job dissatisfaction, injustice perceptions, psychological and physical illness, deviant behaviors or withholding of organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g. Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2006; Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, & Ensley, 2004; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001; Zellars et al., 2002). These studies have generally interpreted abusive supervision based on the characteristics and personality traits of supervisors, and have mostly ignored the variability that exists between individuals and different contexts (Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2009).

Most studies of abusive supervision have focused on moderating factors – both individual and situational – that exacerbate the effects of exposure to abusive supervisors (e.g. Tepper, 2000; Tepper, 2007). Some other studies, albeit scarce, have also identified possible buffers of the adverse effects of abusive supervision (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008), namely subordinates’ individual characteristics, such as conscientiousness (Tepper et al., 2001), power distance orientation (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012; Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013), or negative reciprocity beliefs (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). However, we believe one key dimension has been overlooked in the literature: task characteristics. Task characteristics may help subordinates better understand their roles and work processes (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), thus minimizing the negative effects of abusive supervisors, by providing task guidance and incentives to perform and to respond to their work demands, reducing their dependence on the supervisor.

We draw on the substitutes of leadership perspective developed by Kerr and Jermier (1978) to propose two task characteristics (i.e. job resources adequacy and role clarity) as potential moderators of the abusive supervision process. According to this model, substitutes of leadership influence the relationship between leaders’ behaviors and work outcomes, by replacing or acting in place of a specific leader behavior. Kerr and Jermier (1978) proposed a variety of subordinate, task, and organizational characteristics that moderate the effect of task and people oriented leadership on relevant behaviors and work outcomes (Kerr, 1977). The effect of these factors (i.e. moderators) is “to negate the leader’s ability to either

improve or impair subordinate satisfaction and performance” (Kerr & Jermier, 1978, p. 377).

## 1. Abusive supervision and distributive justice

Previous research has long recognized that there is a relationship between leader effectiveness and distributive, procedural, and interpersonal fairness (e.g. van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & van Knippenberg, 2007; Grover & Coppins, 2012). Organizational justice plays an important role in leadership, in that subordinates’ perceptions of fairness determine their evaluations of supervisors’ leadership capabilities (Pillai, Scandura, & Williams, 1999). As justice research clearly suggests, the fairness of the outcomes and treatment received from their leaders constitutes a key concern to followers (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Therefore, if managers do not pay attention to fairness (regarding processes, interpersonal treatment or outcomes), leadership cannot be effective because followers will reject leader authority (Pillai, Scandura & Williams, 1999).

Abusive supervision represents a source of injustice that has serious implications for organizations and employees (Tepper, 2007). Tepper’s (2000) model of abusive supervision was derived from the theory of organizational justice, since abusive supervision affects perceptions of interactional, procedural and distributive unfairness, with serious implications for organizations and employees. That is, when subordinates perceive injustice, disconcerting feelings of imbalance may lead to negative attitudes and behaviors, including job dissatisfaction and turnover intentions. Justice scholars refer that distributive justice (perceived fairness of the outcomes or allocations that an individual receives) is the best predictor of personal outcomes (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001), such as job satisfaction.

Since distributive justice deals with the perceived fairness of outcomes, it presents strong implications in the organizational context, of which the distribution of outcomes is an essential component (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). For example, subordinates of abusive supervisors may feel disadvantaged compared to target referents, by perceiving that they are getting less than they deserve or they may have to overcome this situation by increasing the time and effort needed to perform their tasks, thus decreasing the perceptions of distributive justice (Tepper, 2000).

## 2. Substitutes for abusive supervision: job resources adequacy and role clarity

Kerr and Jermier (1978) proposed the concepts of neutralizers and substitutes for leadership when they questioned the assumption present in nearly all leadership theories that leaders always have an effect on followers, regardless of the style adopted or the situation (Wu, 2010). These authors argued that leaders’ behaviors are not the only influence on subordinates’ understanding, attitudes, and effectiveness, nor are the most important factor in some situations (Wu, 2010). Instead, Kerr and Jermier (1978) suggested 14 characteristics of subordinates (e.g., ability/experience/knowledge, need for independence, professional, orientation, indifference to organizational rewards), tasks (e.g., unambiguous/routine, methodologically invariant, provides its own feedback, intrinsically satisfying), and organizations (e.g., formalization, inflexibility, highly specified functions, cohesive work group, organizational rewards not within leader control, spatial distance between leader and subordinate) believed to neutralize and/or substitute for the effects of a leader’s behavior, either positive or negative (Dionne, Yammarino, Howell, & Villa, 2005). These characteristics may interact with leaders’ behaviors or may influence subordinates’ job satisfaction, morale, role perceptions

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