

Is Abusive Supervision Totally Dark in Public Management? A Multiple Linear Regression Model of Abusive Supervision, Underdog Expectations, Self-esteem and Impression Management Behavior

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Keywords: Abusive Supervision, Impression Management, Underdog Expectations, Self-Promotion, Ingratiation.

Abstract: Abusive supervision, that affects a large number of employees and workers, and brings huge costs to the company, the government and society, often is regarded as a dark leadership. However, this study, based on the impression management theory, explores the positive impact of abusive supervision on employees, that is, abusive supervision stimulates employees' impression management behavior: self-promotion and ingratiation. In addition, we explore the mediating role of underdog expectations between abusive supervision and impression management behavior. We also explore the moderating role of self-esteem in this model. In order to test the hypotheses, we propose a bi-daily longitudinal survey to collect data and design several multiple linear regression models. In the end, we discuss implications and limitations of our argument for theory and practices. This study puts forward feasible theoretical reasoning, data collection methods and data processing models for testing the positive effect of abusive supervision in public management, promotes the diversified understanding of abusive supervision in the field of management, and provides enlightenment for management practice.

1 INTRODUCTION

Abusive supervision is generally regarded as the dark or destructive side of leadership supervision behavior (Aryee, Chen, Sun, Debrah, 2007; Tepper, 2007). It depicts “the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2007). Because of its universality in the workplace and its negative impact, abusive supervision has attracted the attention of scholars (Crystal, Farh, Zhijun, Chen, 2014). Considering that abusive supervision is dark leadership, many scholars' research mainly starts from its dark side, to show its negative impact on organization and employee. For the individual victim- employees, abusive supervision will cause more negative feedback behaviors (Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, Duffy, 2008; Hoobler & Brass, 2006) and reduce out of role behaviors within the organization (Zellars,

Tepper, Duffy, 2002; Aryee, Sun, Zhen, Debrah, 2008).

Previous studies focused on the negative impact of abusive supervision, identified it as a completely dark leadership trait. However, the paradox and diversity of it are ignored, that is, under specific circumstances or conditions, abusive supervision may also lead to positive results. Recently, empirical study found that employees under abusive supervision would increase their supervisor-directed helping behavior due to self-blame and guilt (Troester and Quaquebeke, 2020). A few scholars also speculate that abuse management may also evoke organizationally productive subordinate responses (Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, Harvey, 2007). However, few empirical studies have been done and the mechanism through abusive supervision affect positive outcome has not been discussed by scholars in depth. Ignoring the possible positive aspects of abusive supervision hinders the comprehensive understanding of this kind of leadership behavior, which means that managers may be too sensitive to

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the negative impact of abuse supervision in workplace.

Based on the impression management theory, this study attempts to explore the positive impact of abusive supervision and constructs a mechanism model about the impact of abusive supervision on impression management behavior. The research contents of this paper are as follows: firstly, explore the positive impact of abusive supervision on employees, that is, abusive supervision stimulates employees' impression management behavior; secondly, explore how abusive supervision has a positive impact, that is, how the relationship between abusive supervision and impression management behavior is mediated by underdog expectation and moderated by self-esteem. The research framework of this paper is shown in Figure 1.

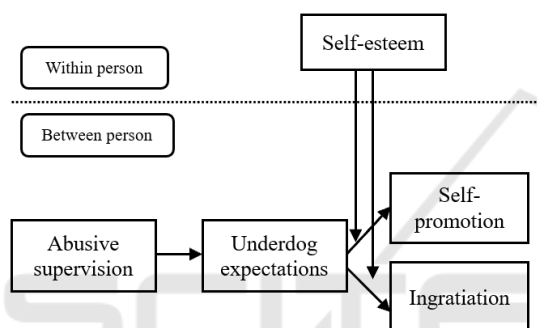


Figure 1: Research framework.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 The Effect of Abusive Supervision on Impression Management Behavior

Impression management theory suggests that, abusive supervision can stimulate people's motivation to try to manage and control others' impression of themselves. This motivation further guides subordinates to carry out impression management behavior. Based on the previous studies on impression management, several tactics that people use to enhance their images at work have been identified. Impression management tactics are typically categorized as other-focused or self-focused tactics (Mcfarland, Yun, Harold, Viera, & Moore, 2005). When other-focused tactics used, they may make the target feel good about him or herself or

show that one holds beliefs, feelings, and values similar to the target, which is typically shown as ingratiation. Self-focused tactics are directed at oneself to make it appear that one has relevant skills and possesses other positive qualities, which is typically shown as self-promotion (Ingold, Kleinmann, KNig, & Melchers, 2015). These two tactics respectively represent that employees seek to be viewed as likable and competent (Bolino, 1999).

Leaders play an important role in helping employees clarify roles (Chen & Bliese, 2002). When leaders adopt abusive behavior, employees will tend to clarify their role as a low ability and feel the decline of their positive image. Based on the impression-management motivation model, people are more motivated to impression-manage when the impressions they make are relevant to the fulfillment of one or more of the goals (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Employees usually pay more attention to work-related goals in the working environment. As the owner of greater power in the work team, leaders are closely related to the realization of employees' personal work goals, such as work resource allocation, promotion, salary. Therefore, employees will tend to think that their image in the hearts of leaders is highly correlated with the achievement of their personal work goals so that they have a stronger motivation to carry out impression management tactics. On the one hand, employees will show their relevant skills to leaders through self-promotion to establish a good image of competence. On the other hand, employees may adopt ingratiation tactics to increase leaders' attention, improve their relationship with leaders and leaders' recognition and love for them.

A few previous studies have shown that abusive supervision can also lead to positive behaviors (Troester & Quaquebeke, 2020). In addition, Lukacik and Bourdage (2019) found that abusive supervision had a significant positive impact on the use of self-promotion. Li, Zhang, and Gong (2018) also found that there is a positive significant correlation between abusive supervision and ingratiation. Therefore, we assume that:

Hypothesis 1a: Abusive supervision will be positively related to self-promotion.

Hypothesis 1b: Abusive supervision will be positively related to ingratiation.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Underdog Expectation

In addition to motivate impression management behavior, abusive supervision also changes the employees' perceived expectations that how supervisors position them. Based on the impression management theory, the target of abusive supervision will feel the discrepancy between the image that they believe others hold of them and how they wish to be viewed due to the negative evaluation of leaders (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Impression management theory holds that a primary human motive, both inside and outside of organizations, is to be viewed by others in a favorable light and to avoid being viewed negatively (Bolino, 1999). However, supervisors who adopt abusive behavior will engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Tepper, 2000), including threatening, humiliating, or ridiculing followers in front of others (Aryee et al., 2007), which is more likely to make followers feel the negative side of their own image in the leader's heart, resulting in a gap between the expected image and the actual image. In the workplace, this discrepancy will be easily shifted and reflected in the perception of job completion and career success, that is, followers who have been abused believe that their leaders regard them as people with poor ability and unlikely to succeed, all of which are conceptually similar to "underdog expectations", which means individual's perception that observers see them as unlikely to succeed (Nurmohamed, 2020). Also, considerable theory and research suggest that the opinion or appraisal of observers in a person's environment especially key observers such as superiors, will give rise to underdog expectations (Nurmohamed, 2020; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1995). Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2. Abusive supervision will be positively related to underdog expectations.

So far, we have argued that abusive supervision will be associated with more impression management behavior as well as with a heightened sense of underdog expectations. Because the perception that others have low expectations of themselves is not a positive expectation and impression, we also expect that it will lead to impression management behavior.

Impression management is not only related to the perception of others' evaluation and impression of themselves, but also the core of it is to take action to change others' view of themselves. When employees choose the type of impression to convey, the next thing to do is to decide how to convey this impression.

Nurmohamed (2020) argued that individuals who believe they are seen as an underdog by others, will generate motivation to prove others are wrong, leading them to work harder to perform better, which behavioral response is similar to self-promotion. Although there is no relevant empirical research to indicate that underdog expectations will lead to ingratiation, we believe that the tactics to change others' low expectations for themselves is similar to the impression management tactics, which can be categorized as other-focused or self-focused tactics. Employees can make leaders feel happy or generate "similar to me" effect through ingratiation, so as to improve leaders' expectations of themselves. Considered together, in addition to its direct effect on impression management behavior, we expect that abusive supervision will influence impression management behavior indirectly via underdog expectations. Consistent with these arguments, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3a. Underdog expectations will be positively related to self-promotion.

Hypothesis 3b. Underdog expectations will be positively related to ingratiation.

Hypothesis 4a. Underdog expectations will partially mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and self-promotion.

Hypothesis 4b. Underdog expectations will partially mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and ingratiation.

2.3 The Moderating Role of Self-esteem

Previous research shows that not all people respond to underdog expectations in the same way. Employees with high self-esteem - that is, employees who believe they are capable, important, successful and valuable - may be more vulnerable to behavior and perceived tendencies. Leary et al. (1995) believe that one function of self-esteem is to provide a relatively fast and automatic evaluation of the response to acceptance or rejection by others, that is, self-esteem is an indicator of the quality of a person's social relationship about acceptance and rejection. As an interpersonal relationship indicator, the function of self-esteem is to monitor the degree of acceptance and exclusion of individuals by others, and promote people to act in some way to minimize the possibility of exclusion or rejection.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) pointed that the degree of discrepancy between the image one would like others to hold of oneself and the image one believes others already hold will motivate impression management. People with high self-esteem think they

are capable and successful. They are eager for others' recognition and acceptance of themselves, rather than looking down or refusing. When they are abused by leaders, the perceive of the collapse of their positive image will be more serious. This tendency is likely to strengthen the impression management behavior caused by "underdog expectations". Therefore, although all employees may be affected by underdog expectations, we expect that employees with high self-esteem will promote them to take more effective actions to improve their self-image by more sensitive monitoring of their recognition. Therefore, we assume that:

Hypothesis 5a. Self-esteem moderates the positive relationship between underdog expectations and self-promotion, such that this association is stronger for those higher (vs. lower) in self-esteem.

Hypothesis 5b. Self-esteem moderates the positive relationship between underdog expectations and ingratiation, such that this association is stronger for those higher (vs. lower) in self-esteem.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to test the hypotheses, we propose the approach of research and design the model.

3.1 Sample

A bi-daily longitudinal survey that last ten days is designed for this study. Before starting the daily study, an initial study should be conducted to measure self-esteem and demographics of participants. During the daily longitudinal survey, we design to issue the questionnaire twice a day. Abusive supervision, underdog expectations, self-promotion and ingratiation should be measured when respondents are halfway through their work(T), such as during lunch time. Underdog expectations, self-promotion and ingratiation should be measured at the end of the wok(T+1).

3.2 Measures

Abusive supervision (AS). We measure abusive supervision halfway through respondents' work using the 10-item scale from Tepper (2000). A sample item is "My boss ridicules me".

Underdog expectations (UE). We measure underdog expectations halfway through respondents' work and after their work using 3-item scale from Nurmohamed (2020). A sample item is "I am seen as

an underdog compared to [my coworkers] in performing this job successfully".

Self-promotion (SP). We measure self-promotion halfway through respondents' work and after their work using 9-item scale from Ingold et al. (2015). A sample item is "I have told interaction partners about problems that I had to solve in order to achieve a particular goal".

Ingratiation (ING). We measure ingratiation halfway through respondents' work and after their work using 4-item scale from Ingold et al. (2015). A sample item is "I have praised the behavior of an interaction partner".

Self-esteem (SE). We measure self-esteem in the initial study by using 14-item scale from Heatherton and Polivy (1991). A sample item is "I'm worried about whether I'm considered successful or failed".

3.3 Model Design

To test the above hypotheses in the paper, several test models are constructed.

For the hypotheses 1a and 1b, the test models are constructed as:

$$SP_{T+1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AS_T + \sum \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

$$ING_{T+1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AS_T + \sum \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

For the hypotheses of mediating role of underdog expectations between abusive supervision and impression management behaviors, the test models are constructed as:

$$SP_{T+1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SP_T + \beta_2 AS_T + \beta_3 UE_T + \sum \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

$$ING_{T+1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 ING_T + \beta_2 AS_T + \beta_3 UE_T + \sum \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (4)$$

For the hypotheses of moderating role of self-esteem between underdog expectations and impression management behaviors, the test models are constructed as:

$$SP_{T+1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SP_T + \beta_2 AS_T + \beta_3 UE_T + \beta_4 SE + \beta_5 UE_T * SE + \sum \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (5)$$

$$ING_{T+1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 ING_T + \beta_2 AS_T + \beta_3 UE_T + \beta_4 SE + \beta_5 UE_T * SE + \sum \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (6)$$

4 DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Implication

This study has some contributions to the literature. Firstly, this study enriches the research of abusive supervision. We consider its positive impact of stimulating employees' impression management behavior. Previous studies on abusive supervision mostly defined it as destructive leadership, which will bring a series of negative effects on employees' cognition, emotional experience and behavior. This study focuses on the possible positive impact of it. We speculate that abusive supervision will cause employees to actively express themselves, which makes up for the shortcomings of previous studies on the positive impact, and has certain theoretical significance for the in-depth study of abusive supervision.

This study also has some practical implications on how to look upon the abusive supervision in the workplace. Abusive supervision can also have a positive impact in specific situations. It can promote the positive behavior of self-promotion and ingratiation by affecting the underdog expectation of employees, which is more significant in employees with high self-esteem. Managers do not need to blindly avoid abusive supervision, and it is not a complete bad thing to occasionally goad employees into action by appropriate abuse.

4.2 Limitation

There are some limitations in this study. We only explore the influence mechanism at individual level, without considering team level factors. For example, the extent of abusive supervision of whole team may have a moderating effect between the individual abusive supervision between underdog expectations. In addition, we just put forward a theoretical model and lacks data support. Empirical research can be done to support and verify this model in the future.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we construct a research framework of the impact of abusive supervision on impression management behavior. Based on the impression management theory, we explore how abusive supervision affect self-promotion and ingratiation by stimulating underdog expectations, and further explore the role of self-esteem as a moderator. We

believe that employees can perceive stronger underdog expectation for the abusive supervision they experience and subsequently engage in impression management behavior. Self-esteem can enhance the positive effect of abusive supervision on impression management behavior.

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