The Moderating Effects of Traditionality on the Negative Effects of Abusive Supervision

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Abstract. The paper aims to examine whether traditionality alleviated or aggravated the negative effects of abusive supervision on employees. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, we advanced that the directions of the moderation of traditionality depended on whether the outcomes were relevant to job performance or well-being of employees. We use questionnaire survey to obtain research data from 258 employees. To reduce the common method variance, the data collection process was carried out in two waves. We found that traditionality alleviated the negative relationship between abusive supervision and proficiency performance which was an intra-subordinate role behavior, meanwhile traditionality aggravated the positive relationship between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal which reflected the well-being of employees and meanwhile was dysfunctional to their work groups. These findings made a contribution that traditionality either alleviated or aggravated the negative effects of abusive supervision on employees. It provides new insights that abusive supervision has different negative effects depending on traditionality.

1. Introduction

Abusive supervision refers to employees’ perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact\textsuperscript{1}. Some evidence proved abusive supervision has negative effects on employees' psychological well-being and behaviors, such as making employees afraid\textsuperscript{2-3}, emotional exhaustion\textsuperscript{4}, increasing psychological pain of employees\textsuperscript{5}, reducing job performance\textsuperscript{6}. Although traditionality may also affect the positive effect of abusive supervision, there are still a few papers identifying that abusive supervision may have positive effects\textsuperscript{7-10}. Our paper is based on most of researches which explore the negative effects of abusive supervision, exploring the moderating effect of traditionality. Many studies have found that employees affected by traditional Chinese values are more respectful and trusting leaders, and are reluctant to treat leaders negatively. Therefore, they are less likely to show retaliation against leaders after being abused\textsuperscript{11}, having a
lower adversely affected on the performance. In conclusion, the high traditionalists have less negative impact on abusive management than the low traditionalists.

However, do high traditionalists suffer less psychological well-being after being abused by their supervisors? Drawing on conservation of resources theory, the loss of important resources will brings pressure, while abusive supervision means the loss of resources such as intimacy and self-esteem with supervisors. However, the more traditional the employees are, the more they respect their leaders and value the evaluation of the leaders\textsuperscript{12}. After being abused by the leader, the high traditionalists will lose much more resources, experience much more pressure, causing lower well-being of employees. However, the existing studies only focus on the moderate effect of traditionality on the relationship between abusive supervision and employee behavior, ignoring the influence of traditionality on abusive supervision and well-being of employees. When studies only focus on the behavior of employees, we believe it’s not a comprehensive conclusion that traditionality will weaken the negative effect of abusive supervision. In contrary, paying attention to the behavior and well-being of employees at the same time, we can examine whether traditionality alleviated or aggravated the negative effects of abusive supervision on employees well.

Considering the shortcomings above, this paper focuses on the behavior and well-being of employees simultaneously, expecting to analyze the influence of abusive supervision on the traditionalists comprehensively. In this study, we think whether traditionality alleviated or aggravated the negative effects of abusive supervision depends on the outcomes. When the outcome is to describe the completion of work tasks, i.e., proficiency performance, traditionality will alleviate the negative relationship between abusive supervision and proficiency performance. In contrast, when the outcome is psychological states, such as psychological withdrawal, which do not violate the role norms of subordinates but are still unfavorable to employees and organizations, traditionality aggravated the positive relationship between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal. Proficiency performance reflects the completion of formal roles and tasks undertaken by individuals in the organization, which is the core work behavior of employees that the organization should pay most attention to\textsuperscript{13}. Psychological withdrawal refers to the psychological long-term avoidance of certain work situations\textsuperscript{14}. And we focus on psychological withdrawal because it not only reflects the well-being of employees, but also causes potential losses to the organization. For employees, psychological withdrawal will lead employees to form evasive orientation\textsuperscript{15}, and easy to experience negative emotions\textsuperscript{16}. At the same time, it wastes the intellectual capital of the organization, for example, only the running late in withdrawal will cause the American enterprise to lose at least 3 billion dollars every year\textsuperscript{17}, which is very unfavorable for the organization\textsuperscript{18}.

This study contributes to the literature on abusive supervision, traditionality, and psychological withdrawal in several ways. First, it analyses holistically the role of traditionality in the relation between abusive supervision and outcomes (proficiency performance and psychological withdrawal), revealing the impact of abusive supervision on employees' explicit performance and potential cost. Second, it enriches the study on the contingency factors of the relationship between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal from the perspective of the cultural characteristics of employees.
2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. The Moderating Role of Traditionality on Abusive Supervision and Proficiency Performance

Traditionality refers to the degree to which individuals uphold traditional values, which best describes Chinese values in traditional culture. Traditional Chinese values include submission to authority, conservatism and endurance, fatalism and defensiveness, filial piety and ancestor worship, and male dominance. Submission to authority refers to that individuals should observe, obey, respect and trust authority in various social situations, guiding employees to obey their leaders and attach importance to their views on leadership. It is the most important part of traditionality and has been paying attention to in lots of researches. Proficiency performance reflects the completion of formal roles and tasks undertaken by individuals in the organization. Although individual performances include proficiency performance, adaptivity performance and proactivity performance, it is proficiency performance that describes in-role performance.

In the traditional Chinese concept, "supervisor" as an authority can exert influence on "subordinate" with less constraints, and "subordinate" should respect, trust and obey "supervisor" in any situation, observe the role norms as subordinates, and abide by the responsibilities of subordinates. Therefore, high traditionalists are still inclined to trust their leaders after being insulted and abused by their leaders. Even if they feel angry, they are also inclined to complete their own work and maintain certain work performance. Otherwise, they will be believed to provoke and disrespect their leaders. In contrast to high traditionalists, low traditionalists keep inducement-contribution balance, and tend to maintain a relatively equal exchange relationship with their leaders and expect them to treat themselves fairly and reasonably.

When the leader treats them maliciously and destroys the equal exchange relationship, low traditionalists tends to increase negative behaviors, such as reducing the job performance. When we talk about performance, it is divided serval parts. Proficiency performance reflects in-role performance, which is supervisions most care about. High traditionalists submit to authority and absolutely not contrast to the supervisor. In their opinion, fulfilling the proficiency performance no matter what happened is their duty, and traditional culture climate also supports it. Previous studies have also found that compared with low traditionalists, high traditionalists are less likely to reduce performance due to abusive supervision. On the contrary, low traditionalists’ performance depend on how their supervisors treat them. Based on the above discussion, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Traditionality alleviated the negative relationship between abusive supervision and proficiency performance such that the negative relationship is stronger among low traditionalists than among high traditionalists.

2.2. The Moderating Role of Traditionality on Abusive Supervision and Psychological Withdrawal

Psychological withdrawal refers to the psychological avoidance of some work situations, such as overtime rest, work time for personal affairs, etc. Previous studies have found that abusive supervision leads to psychological withdrawal of employees. And drawing on conservation of resources theory, the loss of important resources will brings pressure, while abusive supervision means the loss of resources such as self-esteem and intimacy with supervisors. As a stress response, psychological withdrawal can keep individuals away from the work situation that
generates pressure psychologically and reduce their emotional dependence on leaders\textsuperscript{[24]}, thus lengthening the psychological distance between supervisors and subordinates, so as to reduce the harm and pressure caused by supervisors' insult and abuse. Moreover, averting certain work situations can help employees avoid being abused by their leaders again\textsuperscript{[25]} and prevent the further loss of resources.

We argue that psychological withdrawal is more likely to occur when high traditionalists are abused by their supervisors. According to the conservation of resources theory, the loss of important resources will cause individuals to experience pressure\textsuperscript{[26]}, so as to avoid further loss of resources. However, different individuals value different resources, so individual characteristics will influence the amount of pressure an individual experiences due to the same pressure source\textsuperscript{[27]}. High traditionalists respect value and trust supervisors, and they think recognition and harmonious relationship with supervisors are very important resources. This is because traditionalists are self-dependent, have a strong need for social approval, attach great importance to the evaluation of authoritative supervisors and cherish the harmonious relationship with supervisors. But, low traditionalists are more independent, and they attach more importance to self-evaluation and self-recognition\textsuperscript{[21]}.

Abusive supervision means that supervisors do not recognize subordinates\textsuperscript{[28]} and do not cherish the harmonious relationship with subordinates. As high traditionalists, the more they respect and trust their supervisors, the easier it is for them to attribute their supervisors' humiliation and abuse to their own fault and negate them, leading to the loss of self-esteem resources and greater psychological pressure. In the face of others' unkindness, people's direct response is to examine whether they have behaved improperly or are worthy of respect\textsuperscript{[25]}. In the inspection process after being abused by the leader, high traditionalists are more likely to think that supervisors' humiliation is justified because they respect and trust the leader, and then attribute the humiliation to their improper behavior or not worthy of respect, so they are more likely to doubt and blame themselves. Self-esteem has always been a very important psychological resource\textsuperscript{[26]}. The loss of self-esteem enables high traditionalists to experience greater psychological pressure, which is more likely to lead to stress response such as psychological withdrawal.

In addition, psychological withdrawal does not violate the subordinate role norms which high traditionalists most cherish. Traditionally, Chinese do not attach importance to the consensus of internal and external\textsuperscript{[29]}. As a consequence, high traditionalists only need to be positive in "external" (such as the proficiency performance of previous analysis), and not to be positive in psychological "internal". In a word, psychological withdrawal doesn't break their traditional values for high traditionalists. Furthermore, psychological withdrawal also cannot be seen by superiors in general\textsuperscript{[30]}.

Therefore, high traditionalists are more likely to experience the loss of resources and psychological withdrawal because of their leaders' humiliation. On the contrary, low traditionalists may experience less loss resources and less likely to psychological withdrawal. Based on the above discussion, we propose:

_Hypothesis 2: Traditionality aggravated the positive relationship between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal such that the positive relationship is stronger among high traditionalists than among low traditionalists._
3. Method

3.1. Samples and Procedure

Questionnaire survey was used to obtain research data. The data collection process was carried out in two waves to reduce the common method variance. First, collect data on abusive supervision and traditionality (questionnaire 1), and then collect data on proficiency performance and psychological withdrawal two days or a week later (questionnaire 2). Fill in the questionnaire anonymously, and match the last four digits of the telephone number with the date of birth.

Data were collected via the following two methods. First, a paper questionnaire was issued to MBA students at a northwestern university in China. The questionnaire 1 were distributed 200 copies, of which the effective recovery of 178, while the questionnaire 2 were distributed 190, of which the effective recovery of 163. One week interval between the two questionnaires, 130 valid and matched questionnaires were collected, and effective return ratio is 87%. Second, gathering electronic questionnaires through WeChat. The questionnaire 1 were distributed 250 copies, of which the effective recovery of 182, while the questionnaire 2 were distributed 220, of which the effective recovery of 163. Two days interval between the two questionnaires, 128 valid and matched questionnaires were collected, and effective return ratio is 73%. It is found that there is no significant difference in the main variables between the two methods through the analysis of variance. A total of 258 valid questionnaires were collected in this study. Among these participants, 49.2% were female, 95.7% had a bachelor's degree or above, and the average age was 28.37 years, the average tenure in the current company is 4.53 years, and the average working experience with the current leader is 2.52 years.

3.2. Measures

Abusive Supervision. Abusive Supervision was assessed using a five-item scale originally developed by Tepper (2000). Responses ranged from 1, ‘never’, to 6, 'very often'. A sample item was: 'My boss ridicules me'. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .97.

Traditionality. Traditionality was assessed using a five-item scale originally developed by Yang et al (1989). Responses ranged from 1, 'strongly disagree', to 6, 'strongly agree'. A sample item was: 'If you are in dispute, justice should be done by the highest of the generations'. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .70.

Proficiency performance. Griffin’s (2007) 9-item scale was modified to measure proficiency performance. Responses ranged from 1, 'never', to 5, 'always'. A sample item was: 'Use standard programs to accomplish core tasks'. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .85.

Psychological withdrawal. An 8-item scale developed by Lehman and Simpson (1992) was used to measure psychological withdrawal. Responses ranged from 1, 'never', to 5, 'always'. A sample item was: 'Leave the workplace for unnecessary reasons'. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .89.

Control variables. Most of empirical researches in abusive supervision controlled similar Control variables [4, 23, 31], according to these researches, we controlled subordinate age, gender, education and organizational tenure, and the time working with leaders. Gender was dummy-coded as 0,"male", and 1, “female”. Educational background is divided into four categories: "below specialty, specialty, undergraduate, graduate and above", which are coded as "0, 1, 2 and 3" respectively.
Educational was divided into four categories: "high school, vocational school, university, graduate school and above", which are coded as "0, 1, 2 and 3" respectively.

4. Results

4.1. Common Method Variance

In this paper, we reduce or analyze the possible common method variance by three methods. Firstly, the data of independent variable (T1), moderate variable (T1) and dependent variable (T2) were collected respectively in two time, which reduced the possible common method variance. Secondly, we aim to examine the moderating effects of traditionality on the negative effects of abusive supervision, while moderating effects is less affected by common method variance [32, 33]. Thirdly, compared to the model with homologous factor, it is found that the chi-square was not significantly smaller than the model without homologous factor ($\Delta \chi^2 = 17.32$, not significantly), indicating that the common method variance was not serious. In conclusion, we believe that the common method variance is not serious in this study.

4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We applied Mplus to conduct confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) designed to examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. In order to reduce the complexity of the model, we parcelled the measurement items of constructs by the balanced group method. Results show that benchmark model fitted the data well ($\chi^2$/df=1.82, RMSEA=0.06, CFI=0.98, TLI=0.97), and the chi-square was significantly less than the chi-square of the model after combining the measurement items of any two factors. Thus, the discriminant validity of the constructs was confirmed. In addition, the factor loading of all items in the benchmark model was significant at the level of 0.01, indicating that the measurement of each construct had convergent validity.

4.3. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all the variables. It can be seen that abusive supervision and proficiency performance were negatively correlated but not significantly ($r=-0.10$, not significantly), which was consistent with previous research results of Harris, Kacmar and Zivnuska [34]. Abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal were significantly positively correlated ($r=0.30, p<0.01$). The slant line in the table 1 was the square root of AVE of each variable, which can be seen that it was greater than the correlation coefficient between this variable and other variables, and also supported the discriminant validity between variables.
Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

| variables               | Mean | SD  | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6     | 7     | 8     | 9     |
|-------------------------|------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Age                     | 28.37| 5.20|       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Gender                  | .51  | .50 | -.14* |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Organization tenure     | 4.53 | 4.43| .75** | -.11  |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Time working with       | 2.52 | 2.60| .52** | -.01  | .66** |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Education               | 2.14 | .48 | .19** | -.09  | -.13* | .23** |       |       |       |       |       |
| Abusive supervision     | 1.91 | .76 | -.01  | -.18**| .03   | -.03  | -.09  | .73   |       |       |       |
| Tradionality            | 3.13 | .93 | .01   | -.12  | .00   | -.04  | .01   | .20** | .57   |       |       |
| Psychological withdrawal| 2.48 | .70 | -.04  | -.13* | -.04  | .02   | .04   | .30** | -.04  | .65   |       |
| Proficiency performance | 4.15 | .61 | .16*  | .18** | .04   | -.02  | -.00  | -.10  | -.09  | -.14* | .70   |

Notes: N=258; *p<0.05, **p<0.01; the diagonal was the square root of AVE

4.4. Tests of Hypotheses

In this study, multivariate regression analysis was performed on SPSS20.0 to test the moderating effects of traditionality, and the results were shown in table 2. The variable that constructed the product term was centralized, and the VIF in all models was no more than 2, indicating that there was no serious multicollinearity. Model 1-3 took proficiency performance as the dependent variable. Model 1 contained control variables, and model 2 added abusive supervision and traditionality. The results showed that abusive supervision and proficiency performance were negatively correlated but not significantly (r=-0.10, not significantly), which was consistent with previous research results [34]. Model 3 added the product term of abusive supervision and traditionality, and the product term coefficient was positive and significant (b=0.15, p<0.001), supporting hypotheses 1. That is to say, traditionality alleviated the negative relationship between abusive supervision and proficiency performance.

Model 4-6 took psychological withdrawal as the dependent variable. Model 4 contained control variables, and model 5 added abusive supervision and traditionality. There was a significant positive correlation between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal (b=0.27, p<0.001). In model 6, the product term coefficient of abusive supervision and traditionality was positive and significant (b=0.13, p<0.01). In Model 5 and 6 all control variables are not significant identifying that control variables are not consistent with dependence variable. Considering that there are still some significant control variables in model 4, we hold the view that abusive supervision may be relevant to control variables which is not significant. Hypotheses 2 was supported. Traditionality aggravated the positive relationship between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal.
Table 2. Results of multivariate regression analysis.

| variables                        | proficiency performance | psychological withdrawal |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|                                  | Model 1  | Model 2  | Model 3  | Model 4  | Model 5  | Model 6  |
| Control variables                |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| Age                              | 0.05***  | 0.05***  | 0.05***  | -0.02    | -0.01    | -0.01    |
| Gender                           | 0.28***  | 0.28***  | 0.30***  | -0.20*   | -0.14    | -0.13    |
| organization tenure              | -0.02    | -0.02    | -0.03    | -0.01    | -0.01    | -0.02    |
| Time working with leaders        | -0.02    | -0.02    | -0.02    | 0.03     | 0.03     | 0.03     |
| Education                        | -0.03    | -0.04    | -0.04    | 0.10     | 0.14     | 0.14     |
| Abusive supervision              | -0.08    | -0.14**  | 0.27***  | 0.23***  |          |          |
| Traditionality                   | 0.09*    | 0.08     |          | -0.08    | -0.09*   |          |
| Abusive supervision × Traditionality |         |          |          |          |          |          |
|                                  | 0.15***  | 0.13**   |          |          |          |          |
| F                                | 5.75***  | 5.14***  | 6.34***  | 1.97     | 5.00***  | 5.32***  |
| $R^2$                            | 0.11     | 0.13     | 0.17     | 0.04     | 0.13     | 0.15     |
| $\Delta R^2$                     | 0.02*    | 0.04***  | 0.09***  | 0.02**   |          |          |

Notes: N=258; *p<0.01, **p<0.001; unstandardized coefficients are reported.

Figure 1-2 showed the moderate effects and simple slope analysis, which directly showed the moderating effects of traditionality. As can be seen from figure 1, traditionality alleviated the negative relationship between abusive supervision and proficiency performance, and the slope were $b_{\text{low traditionality}}=-0.34(p<0.001)$, $b_{\text{high traditionality}}=0.01$ (not significant), supporting hypothesis 1. As shown in figure 2, the higher the traditionality, the stronger the positive relationship between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal. The slope were $b_{\text{low traditionality}}=0.13$ (not significant), and $b_{\text{high traditionality}}=0.38(p<0.001)$, which further supported hypothesis 2. In addition, according to the Preacher’s research[^35], the confidence interval of simple slope was analyzed, in order to more accurately estimate the range of simple slope significantly not to zero.

We can see in figure 3, it is found that there was a significant negative correlation between abusive supervision and proficiency performance (simple slope is negative, and the confidence interval didn’t include 0) when the level of traditionality was medium and low (less than 3.34 and the mean was 3.13). However, when the traditionality was extremely high (higher than 5.36, and the upper limit was 6), there was a significant positive correlation between abusive supervision and
proficiency performance (simple slope was positive, and the confidence interval didn’t include 0). While when traditionality was higher (between 3.34 and 5.36), there was no significant correlation between abusive supervision and proficiency performance (the confidence interval of simple slope contained 0). To sum up, for employees with low or middle traditionality, abusive supervision reduced their proficiency performance, but for the high traditionalists, there was a significant positive correlation between abusive supervision and proficiency performance. In addition, when the traditionality was low (less than 2.52), there was no significant correlation between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal (the confidence interval of simple slope contained 0). Meanwhile, when the level of traditionality was middle or high (greater than 2.52), there was a significant positive correlation between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal (simple slope was positive, and the confidence interval didn’t include 0), indicating that the high traditionalists were more likely to produce psychological withdrawal under the abusive supervision.

Figure 1. The moderating effect of traditionality on the relationship between abusive supervision and proficiency performance.

Figure 2. The moderating effect of traditionality on the relationship between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal.
5. Conclusion

As a typical destructive leadership behavior, a large number of studies on the interaction between abusive supervision and traditionality have shown that traditionality can eliminate the negative effects of abusive supervision. The present study enriches the previous research conclusions by focusing on the moderating effect of traditionality on the relationship between abusive supervision and different outcome variables. We found that traditionality alleviated the negative relationship between abusive supervision and proficiency performance which was an intra-subordinate role behavior, meanwhile traditionality aggravated the positive relationship between abusive supervision and psychological withdrawal which reflected the well-being of employees and meanwhile was dysfunctional to their work groups.

In this study, we found that traditionality alleviated or aggravated the negative effects of abusive supervision depends on the outcomes. When the outcome is an in-role behavior of subordinates, such as proficiency performance, traditionality can alleviate the negative impact of abusive supervision, while when the outcome are negative behaviors such as psychological withdrawal which has not break subordinate role norms, but also can bring negative consequences, the traditionality will aggravated the negative effects of abusive supervision on employees.

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