The influence of abusive supervision on workplace cheating behavior

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Abstract. The paper presents a mediated model based on the self-determination theory, focusing on enterprise management practices, need fulfillment. A total of 204 questionnaires were collected through a survey method, and data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26. The results indicate a significant positive influence of abusive supervision on employee' cheating behavior. Need fulfillment mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and employee' cheating behavior. Based on the research findings, leaders should pay attention to their own behavior, treat subordinates well, and prevent the occurrence of employee cheating behavior to enhance organizational effectiveness.

1 Introduction

Workplace cheating behaviors, represented by employee lying, performance cheating, time theft, feigning sickness, and distorting facts, are often destructive, covert, and increasing in frequency [1]. Wells Fargo dismissed 5,300 employees for opening fraudulent accounts to meet sales targets and performance bonuses. Employee workplace cheating behaviors result in approximately 7% loss of annual profits for companies [2], posing a serious threat to their development.

Abusive supervision, as a widespread leadership behavior in the workplace, is an important factor that influences employee behavior. Scholars suggested that negative leadership behaviors have a greater impact on employee behavior. Studies based on self-protection theory, found that cheating is one of the strategies employees use to cope with abusive supervision. Workplace cheating as a coping mechanism satisfies employees' self-psychological needs, reducing perceived threats from the environment and enhancing their self-fulfillment [2]. However, the reasons behind the adoption of such strategies are still unclear. Research indicates that employees spontaneously seek positive outcomes, avoiding negative consequences to safeguard their own interests. Likewise, hedonism confirms that individuals are more inclined toward pleasurable outcomes and avoiding painful ones [3]. The self-protection mechanism suggests that when faced with negative events, people experience various emotions and reactions. To protect their resources from being affected, employees choose strategies that favor the restoration of their own resources. Abusive supervision could be considered as stressor, which often triggers employees' self-protection mechanisms. Subordinates, to avoid further impact from abusive supervision, often engage in self-serving behaviors, such as cheating.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) points that individuals have innate developmental needs, which are fundamental needs, such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness [4]. Abusive supervision, on the other hand, leads to a decrease in the fulfillment of these needs, triggering employees' self-protection mechanisms. From a cognitive perspective, this theory provides a basis for explaining how employees respond to abusive supervision. Thus, this paper proposes that individuals' cognitive perception of being subjected to abusive supervision determines their coping strategies (such as workplace cheating behavior).

2 Theoretical and Hypotheses

2.1 Abusive Supervision and Need Fulfillment

The STD posits that individuals have basic psychological needs, like autonomy, relatedness, and competence [4]. Based on our theoretical framework, it is believed that abusive supervision is hindering employees' need fulfillment. Abusive supervision refers to subordinates' perception of sustained hostile behaviors, verbal and non-verbal, from their supervisors, excluding physical contact. Abusive leaders often engage in behaviors such as mocking, yelling, and intimidating employees. They diminish employees' accomplishments and may even appropriate credit for their work. Furthermore, they attribute unfavorable outcomes to employees [5].

Firstly, abusive supervision hinders the need for competence. When leaders undermine employees' achievements, it conveys a message of inadequacy, leading employees to doubt their own abilities. Therefore, abusive supervision may threaten employees' perception...
of their own competence and undermine their sense of achievement, which can have a negative impact on their competence. Literature indicates that when managers engage in abusive behavior towards subordinates, the subordinates may attribute the abuse to their own poor performance [6]. Thus, abusive supervision impedes individuals’ need for competence.

Secondly, abusive supervision obstructs relatedness needs. Employees who experience targeted abusive supervision from their leaders in the workplace may face exclusion from their colleagues. Evidence substantiates that individuals are inclined to display reduced empathy towards their colleagues who experience abusive supervision, potentially leading to social exclusion. This social exclusion, in turn, creates internal conflict for the abused employees and conveys a message of being unwelcome in the workplace, hindering their relatedness needs.

Thirdly, abusive supervision impedes the need for autonomy. As abusive supervision threatens individuals’ positive self-evaluation, abused employees are more likely to perceive the abusive behavior as an intention to harm them from their leaders [6], thus diminishing their sense of control over the environment. Prior studies have demonstrated that individuals inherently experience a diminished sense of autonomy when subjected to abusive supervision. In the workplace, employees who are subjected to abusive supervision may become submissive and may worry about facing more severe abusive behavior. Therefore, the erosion of autonomy reduces individuals’ need for autonomy.

In summary, we believe that the expectations of individuals experiencing abusive supervision have an overall negative impact on the satisfaction of their basic needs. Then, we make the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision negatively impacts need fulfillment.

2.2 The role of need fulfillment

Within the framework of self-protection mechanism, a stress-inducing environment can elicit self-serving behaviors, such as cheating, which serve to shield individuals from threats and alleviate negative experiences linked to situational stressors. Essentially, self-interest emerges as a motivation to safeguard oneself from harm [2]. Based on the self-determination theory, when basic needs are not met, employees may experience negative states such as anxiety and depression, and individuals often take action to compensate for their obstructed needs [4]. Therefore, when basic needs are obstructed, an individual’s well-being is threatened, leading to the activation of self-protective motives. Subsequently, individuals may engage in behaviors that fulfill their basic needs.

Workplace cheating refers to a deliberate and unethical behavior, such as dishonesty or falsifying performance, carried out with the intention of advancing one’s personal interests [2]. It enables individuals to cope with the impediments caused by leader’s abusive supervision. Specifically, abusive supervision can enhance individuals’ self-interest motivations, which are able to prevent them from recognizing the morality of their actions. For example, employees may embellish their work outcomes to appear more competent. By engaging in cheating, individuals can potentially decrease the probability of future threats to their competence needs and mitigate threats originating from others. Likewise, by manipulating their performance to create the perception of higher value to the organization, employees may elevate their status within the organization and experience a heightened sense of control in their work. Therefore, employees can protect their relational and autonomy needs and safeguard their future threatened needs. In conclusion, when individual needs are not met, disadvantaged individuals may become self-centered [7][8]. Based on their perception of cheating as a justified and essential approach to advancing their own interests and mitigating the adverse effects of abusive supervision, individuals may engage in such behavior. Previous research indicates that a decrease in social needs resulting from a lack of interpersonal care from teachers fosters academic dishonesty among students [9]. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Need fulfillment mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace cheating.

3 Measures

This study conducted a questionnaire survey on manufacturing companies in the southwestern region of China. To mitigate common method biases, data were collected one week apart. At time 1, questionnaires were distributed to employees to measure abusive supervision by their supervisors and self-attribution of harm. At time 2, questionnaires measuring need fulfillment were administered. At time 3, workplace cheating behaviors and demographic characteristics were assessed. The questionnaire utilized a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to represent different levels.

Abusive Supervision. We used a 5-item scale [10] with sample items such as "My supervisor ridicules me" ($\alpha = 0.968$).

Need Fulfillment. Measurement was conducted using a 9-item scale developed by La Guardia et al. (2000), with sample items such as "I feel competent" ($\alpha = 0.878$).

Workplace Cheating. We employed a 7-item scale [2] to measure, with sample items such as "I exaggerate my work hours to make myself appear more efficient" ($\alpha = 0.911$).

Control variables. This study included gender, age, work experience, and educational background as control variables, which were measured using dummy variables.

4 Result

The results are shown in Table 1. This study employed a hierarchical regression approach to test hypothesis. First, the control variables were entered into the regression to form Model 1. Then, abusive supervision was added to construct Model 2. The results indicated that abusive
supervision had a positive impact on workplace cheating ($r=0.663, p<0.001$), supporting hypothesis 1. Next, needs fulfillment was added to construct Model 3, and results showed that needs fulfillment had a negative impact on workplace cheating ($r=0.196, p<0.01$), and the positive impact of abusive supervision on workplace cheating decreased ($r=0.585, p<0.001$). To ensure the robustness of the results, bootstrapping was conducted. The results showed a 95% confidence interval of [0.022, 0.136]. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was supported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Regression Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.458)</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>(0.832)</td>
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<td>Experience</td>
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<td>(0.089)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abusive supervision</td>
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<td>(0.000)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need fulfillment</td>
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<td>(0.005)</td>
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<td>R²</td>
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Note: ***, **, * respectively represent significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, with the values in parentheses indicating the significance level p statistic.

5 Conclusion

Building upon SDT and prior research, this study constructed a mediation model to examine the relationship between abusive supervision and workplace cheating. The research findings that abusive supervision positively influences workplace cheating via need fulfillment.

The findings of this study hold significant practical implications for organizational management practices. The results indicate that Abusive supervision and unsatisfied needs may lead to workplace cheating behaviors among employees, which are unethical and have detrimental consequences. Therefore, organizations and leaders should make efforts to prevent the occurrence of such behaviors.

Firstly, organizations should pay attention to and observe the selfish behaviors of members in their daily work life and identify the causes and motivations behind such behaviors. This holds particular significance for organizational leaders, as they have a pivotal role in shaping the organizational climate, and abusive supervision can yield substantial adverse impacts on employees. Therefore, organizations should prioritize addressing the negative impact of Abusive supervision and work towards improving the organizational environment. Organizations should care about their members at all levels, consider various aspects of their needs, enhance their sense of belonging and responsibility towards the organization, and make employees feel respected. Implementing a robust, comprehensive, and fair system of policies can help deter self-serving behaviors. Additionally, organizations need to foster a sense of cohesion and enhance members’ organizational identification and closeness, allowing them to feel part of the organizational family and contribute their time and energy to the organization's development. This can help reduce deceptive behaviors and encourage tangible work achievements.

Secondly, Managers should employ various methods to help employees who have experienced Abusive supervision alleviate stress. First and foremost, organizations should continually improve formal communication channels such as forums and establish informal communication channels through events, break rooms, and participation in various activities. By facilitating communication and interaction among employees, organizations can increase a sense of companionship and alleviate the negative impact of Abusive supervision.

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Reference

