

# Examining the Impact of Abusive Supervision on Citizenship Behavior: The Perspective of South African Public Servants

Phakamani Irvine Dlamini

Faculty of Economics, Development & Business Science, University of Mpumalanga, Mbombela, South Africa  
Email: Phakamani.Dlamini@ump.ac.za

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## Abstract

The subject of abusive supervision is pervasive in most of the public sectors of South Africa. Drawing on the existing and limited body of research knowledge about abusive supervision and organizational citizen behavior, the current qualitative study critically assessed how employees protrude themselves in the organization after being victims of abusive supervision. This study observed the impact of abusive supervision on subordinates' citizenship behavior in South African public organizations. The study sought to establish how public servants' employees would respond in an event whereby they are antagonized by abusive supervision in an organization. The researcher examines how abusive supervision affects the citizenship behavior of the employees. Findings demonstrated that South African public servants react irrationally in the event of abusive supervision. A focus group interview with Seven groups of municipal employees was conducted using open-ended questions. Afterwards, there were one-on-one interviews with the seniors working in the public servant sectors.

## Keywords

Abusive, Supervision, Citizenship Behavior, Subordinates

## 1. Introduction

The diversity of the South African public workforce suggests that supervisors should be able to deal with a flood of incompatible viewpoints mostly from their subordinates. Since the end of the apartheid era, the issue of workplace diversity has been at the forefront of realignment. Workers from various walks of life or backgrounds frequently struggle to work effectively together due to disparities in

different perceptions, values, and multicultural backgrounds (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2017). According to Grobler, Warnich, Carrel, Elbert, and Hatfield (2006), the success of South African organizations is primarily based on their aptitude to detect the emergence of a diverse workforce. Similarly, De Beer, Schaufeli, & De Witte (2022) contend that the importance of effective diversity management in South African organizations cannot be overstated. Understanding the shift in South African organizations toward effective diversity management is critical (De Beer et al., 2022).

One of the most crucial leadership skills that supervisors ought to possess is an understanding that workplace behavior portrayed by subordinates depends on their cultural background and diversity (Zhong, Wayne, & Liden, 2014). Negative leadership behavior has been identified as abusive supervision. However, the influence of cultural background on abusive supervision and employee citizenship behavior is rarely considered. For example, in South Africa, most educators who teach at exit levels in public high schools, (matriculation) are significantly forced by the organizational culture of the school to work overtime, without any form of remuneration either from the school or the government.

It is interesting to delineate that some scholars have configured the positive outcomes of abusive supervision. The same sentiments are being shared by Lee, Yun, & Srivastava (2013) who have alluded that viable abusive supervision diminishes employee resources while on the other side it has the potential of maximizing other resources that have not yet been exuded by subordinates' employees such as creativity, which may improve teamwork performance shortly. On the other hand, in South Africa, most employees in the public sector have affiliated with trade unions, beyond any shadow of a doubt they are much more sensitive to their human rights. Therefore, any perceived form of abusive supervision in the workplace might be a transgression of a subordinate's human rights.

Multiple scholars alluded that one of the predominating factors to influence employee engagement and citizenship behavior in the workplace is the leadership style. According to current research, positive leadership behaviors are mostly connected with higher citizenship behavior, furthermore with higher individual employees' performance and workplace engagement (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013; Lam & Xu, 2018).

The aim of this study is to fill numerous research gaps concerning the impact of abusive supervision on subordinate employees' citizenship behavior. It is worth outlining that numerous studies were fixated on how a particular leadership style will enhance and influence job performance positively. Several studies have shown that certain leadership styles have positive effects on work engagement, but the mechanisms by which leaders interact and influence employees' levels of work engagement remain unknown. The majority of work engagement research focuses on the impact of job resources and personal resources (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013; Saks & Gruman, 2014). Instead, the purpose of this study is to extend existing lines of research by investigating how psychological safety in-

fluences work engagement.

This study falls under the broader category of numerous forms of leadership styles and their impact on employees' job performance. In conducting this study we viewed abusive supervision as subordinates' perceptions of supervisors' sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact (Haggard & Park, 2018). According to this definition, abusive supervision is characterized as a subjective assessment. A supervisor's behavior could be viewed as abusive in one context and non-abusive in another, and two subordinates' assessments of the same supervisor's behavior could differ.

## 2. Theoretical Framing and Literature Review

This study utilised the theory that was coined by Homans (1958) he developed his ideas on social exchanges by drawing on a variety of theories and fields. For example, in his book, *Street Corner Society*, he drew on William Foot Whyte's ethnographic study of Boston's Italian immigrants, gangs, and "corner boys" (1943). In this culture, favours were exchanged in such a way that if a person did not return a favour, he or she should not expect another favour in the future. Homans observed that in this culture, equivalent exchanges were expressions of friendship, and deviation from equivalence harmed the relationship.

These early observations, combined with the application of basic economic concepts, resulted in today's complex theories of social exchange, social behaviour, and equity Homans (1958) advocated for scholars to return to "social behaviour as exchange (p. 606)", which he described as the oldest theory of social behaviour. Surprisingly, Homans never uses the phrase "social exchange theory" in his early writings. Homans (1958) used behaviourism to explain human behaviour as similar to that of pigeons receiving corn rewards for pecking a target (cost). He also drew on his prior research and theory on small groups, specifically social influence, equilibrium, cohesiveness, and conformity.

It cannot be disputed that understanding effective leadership behaviours are critical in the workplace. However, it appears equally important to recognize and investigate the behaviours of professionals in positions of leadership that harm or can result in negative emotions of subordinates and organizations.

Abusive supervision is an important area to research in the workplace because immeasurable minor acts of workplace aggression can eventually lead to workplace violence. Abusive supervision is a self-explained concept characterized by harmful behavior that is usually associated with several negative emotions or behaviours (Haggard & Park, 2018). Other scholars define abusive supervision as subordinates' perceptions of their supervisors' sustained display of hostile, verbal, and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact (Brees, Mackey, Martinko, & Harvey, 2014). An abusive leadership style can be viewed as the continuous use of hostile behaviors such as shouting, public criticism, the use of threats and intimidation, aggressive outbursts, ridiculing, and physical violence (Tepper et al., 2009).

Kim, Atwater, Latheef, & Zheng (2018) have outlined that employee indicated the abusive supervisor's personality or performance pressure, and their findings revealed that abusive supervision indirectly contributed to counterwork productive behavior via leader-member exchange. It is worth noting that the assignment on abusive supervision was established by scholars in the field of organizational behavior, a long time ago. Public criticism, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions, and coercion were identified as abusive supervision manifestations (Bies & Tripp, 2005). Ashforth's (1994) description of organizational "petty tyranny", (Neuman & Baron, 2005) examples of nonphysical workplace aggression and Bennett and Robinson's (2005) typology of deviant organizational behaviour all share similar themes.

### 3. An Overview of Employee Citizenship Performance

Performance is a multidimensional construct that is both complex and multidimensional (Vey & Campbell, 2004). The criterion theory divides job performance into three dimensions: task performance, citizenship performance, and counterproductive performance (Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2001). According to Rotundo and Sackett (2002), counterproductive performance, along with task performance, contributed more to judgments of overall work performance than citizenship performance. For this study, the literature reviewed under job performance is on citizenship behavior. Accordingly, Organ (1997) defined organizational citizenship behavior as those actions that don't necessarily involve completing tasks but still have a positive impact on the organization. These actions include altruistic behavior, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue. These concepts served as the foundation for the conceptualization of employee citizenship performance as actions that advance the objectives of the organization by enhancing its social and psychological climate.

Some of the most distinguishable scholars in the field of organizational behavior have outlined that, citizenship behavior can be viewed as discretionary because it is not part of the formal job requirement. Considering its nature, it has a significant impact on organizational performance (Müller & Weigl, 2017). Employees who exhibit this type of behavior use their discretion to assist other employees in the workplace, ensuring that organizational performance remains consistent. Although Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) is discretionary from the employees' perspective, organizations rely on this type of behavior to achieve organizational goals; however, employees' perceptions of how the organization treats them may influence their OCB (Bolino, Hsiung, Harvey, & LePine, 2015).

A multitude of scholars of a similar view that organizational citizenship behavior is necessary for the social and psychological functioning of the organization because they aid in encouraging camaraderie among employees and supervisors (Muldoon, Singh, & Vidarthi, 2019; Mahooti et al., 2018). The research

provides two perspectives that explain the rationale for valuing OCBs. From the supervisor's perspective, it is about using subordinates' OCB to reduce their workload, whereas for subordinates to perform OCB is stimulated by the desire to create favourable work arrangements (Muldoon et al., 2019).

#### 4. Methodology

A qualitative research design provided the researchers with a unique set of tools to address the analysis's goals and to link the research objectives and the empirical findings. Furthermore, the aim of this research was to explore public servants' experiences and their perceptions of their behavior, rather than trying to generalize the data using inferential statistics. The unit of research was every individual who shared similar public servant's experiences and perceptions of the research subject. The research participants were public servants who belonged to the government sector. The research participants were potentially vulnerable, considering the possible consequences of speaking openly and honestly about discriminatory practices, particularly their citizenship behavior implementation.

The objective of this research project was to gain a rich understanding of the public servants' experiences of abusive supervision and their citizenship behaviour. As such, the research is subjective, meaning that it explored the public servants' meanings, perspectives, and experiences. This study, therefore, required a qualitative research design, and particularly the hermeneutic approach, which enabled the researchers to make sense of the public servants' experiences and to thematize the research findings.

Qualitative research methodology affords more understanding of the findings of quantity studies, whereas quantitative research methodology focuses primarily on the numerical analysis of concepts (Kothari, 2013).

The multitude of scholars shares the same sentiments of that utilizing qualitative research because it is regarded as the most interactive method of investigation, in which a researcher collects data in face-to-face situations by interacting with the chosen participants. Individual human life cannot be observed, but it can be meaningfully viewed by considering individuals' experiences, attitudes, values, and norms (Creswell & Plano, 2007).

#### 5. Data Collection Method

The primary method of data collection for this study was a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with South African officials in two government agencies. The Department of Communications and the Department of Science and Technology were chosen as these two departments represent the main actors of the South African government in this e-government project. Government agencies are responsible for various activities in support of these important objectives (Public Service Act, 1994). These departments and officials have many functions and departments that work directly with or under the supervision of utility managers. In addition, the respondents represented a diverse and heterogeneous

population in terms of age, education, experience, responsibilities, and involvement in various audits. The research problem under investigation is sensitive in nature. First, public servants may be reluctant to give honest answers or engage with their immediate superiors for fear of reprisals. Some believe that these findings lead to stressful work experiences. Moreover, this topic is one of the most sensitive topics in ethics and decision-making literature. A research sample like this should provide accurate and reliable information.

A focus group interview with Seven groups of municipal employees and Four school teachers was utilized to enhance the generalizability of the study findings. Furthermore, there were individual session interviews with Two senior managers from the municipality and Four school principals. The intention of using these senior managers was to ascertain their perspective on the behavioral outcomes of their subordinate employees when they have been victims of abusive supervision. At the inception of the interview session, the following questions were probed on the study participants, firstly the study seeks to gain an understanding and behavioral outcome of those who have been victims of abusive supervision. Secondly, it was necessary to seek their connection level with their respective institutions after they experience abusive conduct from their superiors. Moreover, intensifying the validity and reliability of the study was indispensable to acquiring the perception of senior management staff concerning subordinates that have been victims of abusive supervision.

## 6. Results

Certain findings have been reinforced by direct quotations. This article contains italicized quotations to put more prominence on specific aspects, the researchers applied discourse analysis to report on implicit rather than explicit responses. Responses were elicited from both subordinate employees and those who are in leadership positions. Participants' responses have been classified according to these themes: relationship between victims of abusive supervision and their co-workers, relationship between victims of abusive supervision and OCB. Lastly supervisor's perspective on abusive supervision.

### **Relationship between victims of abusive supervision and their co-workers**

It was paramount for this study to investigate outcome behaviors for those who have been victims of abusive supervision relating to their co-workers. This is significant not only for theoretical purposes but also for practical purposes because an understanding of this would serve as the foundation for initiating pertinent managerial interventions. Interestingly, the study findings have exhibited that victims of abusive supervision will engage in behaviors that are detrimental to the organization and its employees. Such kinds can have negative consequences. one of which is how the victim is treated by their coworkers. One of the group participants reported that:

*“I m a Nazareth, and in most cases, I need to take Friday afternoons off work to get home before it's dark and prepare for the Sabbath. At the moment, my*

*boss is content to let me do this and make up the time later in the week. However, he is considering introducing a new shift arrangement, which means I will no longer be able to do this, As a result, that has automatically created a division among other co-workers who belong to various religious practices, and we end up treating each other based on our religious beliefs.”*

The above finding indicates that abusive supervision can cause several dysfunctional outcomes in the organization. For example, employees who experience abusive supervision can make the lives of their co-workers miserable and they have the potential of creating a toxic working environment.

Some of the participants indicated that in their working places abusive supervision led to barriers to teamwork. Thus, if they are operating in a negative atmosphere with their co-workers, that results in a negative interaction. One of the group members reported that:

*My manager is an Indian nationality, during the peak of the COVID-19 era, he instructed most, Indians and other White race people to work from home, while most of us blacks were compelled to be at work, that on its own has caused division against each other work, It has made us treat each based on our racial belonging, and that affects the team spirit.*

It cannot be disputed that teamwork can play a very pivotal role in maximizing the level of success in the organization but only if they have the necessary qualities and are working in a very harmonious environment.

#### **Relationship between victims of abusive supervision and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB)**

In most cases, employee citizenship performance in any organization is usually influenced by employees' feelings of serenity and satisfaction with various job-related issues. Under this theme, the researchers sought to inquire whether employees go above and beyond their duties to provide services without regard for additional compensation in an event of abusive supervision. One of the participants allude that:

*I don't have an intrinsic motivation to teach over the holidays, because of the management of this school. They treat us like trash whenever we are in our staff meetings, it's always a case that they will all be yelling at us over trivial things and it's so undermining in terms of our dignity.*

This indicates that OCB at the individual level will be influenced by the nature of a leadership style relationship with their supervisors. High-quality leadership is vital for high-quality OCB at the individual and organisational levels. It is worth outlining that the findings of the study have exhibited that victims of abusive supervision tend towards being reluctant in helping out their co-workers, with work-related problems, they have a tendency of gossiping negatively about their colleagues, at their level because they also carry a motive of ensuring that the other colleagues who are not being victims of abusive supervision are also caught by the same snare. One of the participants in one of the groups also reported that:



*My boss kept noticing my tiniest mistakes, but he kept making a big deal out of them all, even though some of them weren't that serious. I kept getting yelled at and always cursed, and that has made me disconnect emotionally from an organization and I now purposefully ensure that I bad-mouth his so-called favorite employees.*

The above findings reflect that victims of abusive supervision reciprocate in their experience by ensuring that, their behaviour does not only harm the organization but also affects individuals at their disposal.

#### **Supervisor's perspective on abusive supervision**

Since supervisors hold positions of authority and could influence vital aspects of employees' careers and lives, it was necessary to establish their direct perspective regarding abusive supervision. In some cases, supervisors may have interactions with subordinates that may probe or tempt them to encounter impulsive behaviour or engage in an abusive leadership style. For example, frustration over a lack of progress on certain tasks on hand or interpersonal conflict may lead to the desire to yell or speak uncivilly toward a specific subordinate. Therefore, this study also needed to exude supervisors' perspectives regarding abusive leadership style in an event when they are confronted by stressful situations. One of the supervisors reported that:

*An effective and peaceful work environment makes employees always willing to go the extra-mile without looking out for any form of compensation, towards the year-end we encounter heavy workloads if you have a good relationship with your staff members it tends to be much easier to tell them to push further beyond their normal scope of duties. But it's impossible to achieve if your relationship with your subordinates is dull.*

The above-shared sentiments revealed that an abusive workplace environment may also perpetuate a destructive culture in which the hostile and non-hostile behaviors of abusive supervisors result in a climate of distrust, disloyalty, and low morale among employees. Thus, causing a decline in employees' OCB. This kind of negative leadership style has the potential to even affect newcomers to the organization in a very destructive manner.

## **7. Discussion**

This study utilizes social exchange theory. Under this theory, obligations between parties are generated through interactions between those parties. The principles underlying social exchange theory in this study were that employees and supervisors have some form of exchange between them, and this exchange is purely along the lines of employees' roles in task performance and supervisors' roles as those entrusted with the management of organizational performance. The study's findings revealed that abuse supervision reduces the quality of exchange (OCB) between the parties, and this reduction in the quality of (OCB) will affect employee performance. The study also revealed that abusive supervision has detrimental effects in any formal organization, as well as the possibility



that abusive supervision has implications for subordinates' performance of both extra roles and in role behavior, which necessitates consideration.

This research has uncovered that subordinates whose supervisors were more engaged in acts of abusive supervision, reported higher turnover, less favorable attitudes toward job, life, and organization, and greater hostility between work and their co-workers. Thus, the study has also revealed that their multiple employees who take sick leave of over a month in their workplace are the ones who have been directly affected by abusive supervision.

Subsequently, abusive supervision had an extensive effect on subordinates' attitudes and psychological distress when they had no feasible means of escape.

By pursuing programs that address the threatening negative side of supervision and consider citizen behavior, public sector organizations can be in a unique position to achieve public safety, health, and well-being. Thus, addressing abusive supervision and desensitizing leader and bureaucratic tactics can allow government policies to address psychological, cultural, and other occupational risks while maintaining service delivery, exciting jobs, and devotion for specific tasks. In line with our understanding of abusive supervision and the citizenship theory, employees who perform or are motivated to work through obligation and fear offer detrimental side effects for the individual, the unit, and the organization. Given that these findings in different parts of the South African public service illustrate that abusive supervision has negative employee outcomes and is a potential precursor for deviant behavior and increased absenteeism, public sector organizations may end up with a sick workforce that affects service delivery. This includes relationships where politicians and leaders distance themselves from unethical labour practices or management systems that result in adverse public opinion, electoral dissatisfaction, and the election of new leadership.

Interestingly participants also lamented that abuse of power based on organizational hierarchies is also a prevalent syndrome in most of the public sectors of South Africa. According to some participants, senior's managers and supervisors engage in unethical behavior toward newly appointed workers, especially those who have just recently graduated and a fresh from their tertiary institutions. Conversely, those who have been with the organization for a longer duration are less vulnerable to workplace abusive supervision. Lastly, it is worth highlighting that, verbal abuse, a lack of ability to deal with situational crises, unfair treatment, and a lack of protection for newly appointed employees from senior employees are examples of unscrupulous behavior identified by participants regarding treatment from their seniors at a higher level if the organization.

## **8. Practical Implication**

Out-of-the-box toxicity is problematic for management since it may go undetected. Organizations now have options, such as establishing corporate helpline facilities for employees who wish to report, conducting employee opinion sur-

veys, or establishing a hotline for self-referral. These are just a few instances of how management can be proactive in resolving workplace issues. The findings have implications for the safety and security of a healthy work environment. This encompasses both the job and the regulatory components; establishing a supportive atmosphere; and managing workplace distractions. Productivity and risk management are critical for any organization. Organizations should use this and related forms of research data in their talent strategy to ensure the best.

This study is one of the few studies conducted in South Africa and therefore has the potential to be original research. It also provides good quality data on major and recent issues affecting current and future employee behavior and indicates directions for future research. The results of the study may be important. The authors made several recommendations, including studies from other fields that collect formal and informal data. We recommend that organizations in all industries maintain human resource management practices and policies focused on employee satisfaction and well-being, even in difficult economic times. Because abusive supervision can affect employees in addition to those in need and the work group, organizations must ensure that leaders understand that such behavior is harmful and will not be tolerated.

Moreover, the overarching contribution of this study is that abusive supervision causes employees to withdraw from the organization emotionally and psychologically and such should be taken seriously by the organization's leadership. Thus, could not only negatively affect the organization but also have a significant impact on the well-being of other employees. Employees' organizational performance may be affected by numerous factors from their management, which could be either internal or external factors. Being accountable for organizational performance is one of management's core duties, and as such, it is reasonable enough to think that the success of any organization mostly relies on a certain leadership style adopted by its management. Therefore, this study has delivered empirical evidence that is in line with the South African workforce, where there is diversity, human rights, and the prevalence of unionists. There has not been a study, as the researcher knowledge in South Africa that links abusive supervision with the organizational citizenship behavior of public servants. Most of the citizens of South Africa have numerous complaints about the level and the quality of services that they receive from various Government Departments of South Africa. The study sought to establish that, could not the inefficiency of public servants be emulated by abusive supervision in their respective organizations. The study has uncovered that victims of abusive supervision have a strong propensity to disconnect emotional and physical from the organization furthermore the discovery made is that victims are so much in prune in ensuring that they create hostility towards their co-workers.

## 9. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There is still plenty to examine in terms of abusive supervision and response

types. Replication of this study would be ideal because this sample, which is unique to the South African setting, limits the extent of generalization to the South African public sector. The scarcity of analogous studies in this area adds to the sample's distinctiveness, but all the variables described have the potential to lead to additional research into abusive supervision. This and other research can use a variety of venues, including subtopics, other nation contexts, the rarity of abusive supervision and successful coping mechanisms, sources, who gains the most from employing them, and future patterns.

Even though this study has reported significant findings regarding the relationship between abusive supervision and organizational citizenship behavior, some limitations should be noted. The study's limitation is that it only considered the ramifications of abusive supervision and did not investigate the causes. One approach to investigating the experience of abusive supervision would be similar to previous research on abusive behaviors directed toward intimate employees. Lastly, time and other essential resources were the major impediments to this study. It is recommended that future research look at the reactions of newly appointed employees concerning abusive supervision. Additionally, considering that South Africa is a diversified country in multiple aspects such as race, culture, languages, religious practices etc., it would be interesting to single out these abovementioned aspects and examine their effects of abusive supervision.

## 10. Conclusion

The study sought to gain an understanding of and behavior of South African public servants concerning abusive supervision and citizenship behavior in the workplace. To better understand the phenomenon's causes, contributing to less OCB from subordinates, it was necessary to explore certain aspects of social exchange theory. In several ways, this study adds to the literature on citizenship behavior, and abusive supervision. It makes a first step toward comprehending the role of citizenship behavior in an organization with the relationship between abusive leadership and supervisor-directed deviance in the public workforce of South Africa. Though abusive supervision may be associated with a negative leadership style, interestingly not every researcher shares similar sentiments. [Brady, Brown, and Liang \(2017\)](#), warn researchers that having negative assumptions about abusive supervision makes it difficult to recognize the important and functional aspects of this negative leadership style in the workplace. Some employees may over-perform in the organization with the motive of ensuring that they do not become the victims of abusive supervision.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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