

## **ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND PROSOCIAL ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR: A STUDY OF WORKERS IN THE BANKING INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*The study examined the relationship between subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision and their reports of prosocial organizational behavior. The study involved 335 bankers selected from 15 commercial banks in Lagos, Nigeria (160 men and 175 women). As predicted, subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision was negatively related with their prosocial organizational behaviors. With regards to the various dimensions of prosocial behavior, abusive supervision had significant negative relationship with prosocial behavior directed to the organization and to individuals but was not significantly related to role-prescribed behaviors. The implications of these results for management practice were discussed and suggestions were made for future research.*

**Keywords:** Abusive Supervision, Prosocial Organizational Behavior

### **Introduction**

Quality leadership in work organizations has continued to attract the interest of organizational researchers and practitioners (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). It is envisaged that good leadership and supervision will elicit positive behaviors from organizational members that will lead to a more effective and efficient organization. However, it has been noted that managers of organizations in the process of supervising others sometimes exhibit behaviors that could be seen as tyrannical, aggressive or abusive (Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999; Zellars, Tepper & Duffy, 2002).

Abusive supervision refers to subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors or managers engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors against them (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision may include behaviors such as use of derogatory names, engaging in explosive outbursts including information, aggressive eye contact, the silent treatment, and humiliating or ridiculing someone in front of others (Keashly, 1998; Zellars, Tepper & Duffy, 2002).

Studies have demonstrated that employees respond negatively to supervisor mistreatment by engaging in behaviors that are harmful to the organization (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell & Marrs, 2009). In the same manner employees will tend to engage less in behaviors that benefit the organization if they perceive mistreatment by their supervisors. In one of the studies that examined the relationship between abusive supervision and positive job behavior, Zellars, Tepper and Duffy (2002) found that abusive supervision is negatively related to subordinates' organizational citizenship behavior. Other researchers have also found abusive supervision to be negatively related with job and life satisfaction (Tepper, 2000), organizational commitment (Duffy & Ferrier, 2003), and organizational citizenship behavior (Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler & Ensley, 2004). On the other hand supportive behaviors from supervisors

have been found to be positively related to several positive job outcomes including employee felt obligation to care about the organization's welfare (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, , Lynch & Rhoades, 2001), affective commitment to the organization (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001; Settoon, Bennett & Liden, 1996), and organizational citizenship behavior (Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997).

One of the major theoretical explanations for such relationships is that of the social exchange model. The concept of social exchange (Blau, 1964) was based on the norm of reciprocity earlier proposed by Gouldner (1960). Generally, the social exchange posits that if one person does another a favour, there is an expectation of some future return. With respect to work organizations, social exchange has long been used to describe the motivational basis behind employees' behaviors and the formation of positive employees' attitude (Levison, 1965). Blau (1964) suggested that the basis of any exchange relationship could be described in terms of either social or economic principles. According to Blau, social exchange just like economic exchange generates an expectation of some future return for contributions, but unlike economic exchange, the exact nature of such return is unspecific. While economic exchange is based on transactions, social exchange relationships are based on the individuals' trust that the other parties to the exchange will fairly discharge their obligations in the long run.

Social exchange has gained prominence in organizational literature (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and has been used to explain why subordinates become obligated to their supervisors to perform in ways beyond what is required of them in the formal employment contract to engage in prosocial organizational behaviors (Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996).

Prosocial organizational behaviors are viewed as socially desirable behaviors exhibited by employees that benefit others in the organization and contribute to organizational effectiveness. These behaviors may include helping colleagues to accomplish certain tasks, sharing with others, and other behaviors that may involve volunteering and cooperating with other employees. Although this set of behaviors may be part of an individuals' job requirements, they are often viewed as extra role behavior and such are closely related to organizational citizenship behavior (Organ, 1988). These behaviors are discretionary in the sense that their performance or omission does not necessarily attract reward or punishment. As such these behaviors may be directed to individual coworkers or to the organization (McNeely & Meglino, 1994). Three dimensions of prosocial behavior have been identified, reflecting the intended beneficiary of the behavior. These include prosocial organizational behavior (directed to the organization as a whole), prosocial individual behavior (directed to specific individuals in the organization), and role-prescribed prosocial behavior (directed towards meeting one's job requirements) (McNeely & Meglino, 1994). It is therefore necessary to investigate the antecedents of these dimensions of prosocial behavior. Specifically, this study aims at investigating the relationships that exist between abusive supervision and the dimensions of prosocial behavior.

The Nigerian banking industry has witnessed a lot of changes in recent time including consolidation, and several other forms of reforms by the Central Bank of Nigeria that have forced banks to adopt several surviving strategies. These changes have led to mergers and acquisition, increase in capital base of Nigerian banks, down-sizing, and adoption of other management strategies targeted at improved performance. In an attempt to increase profits and to acquire competitive advantages, some of the banks have also adopted some strategies that may be deemed to be detrimental to employees including adopting some marketing

strategies that may be viewed as unethical. In order to meet set targets (sometimes unrealistic targets) by some of the banks, some managers involve themselves in some behaviors that may be classified as abusive. Stories of how bank employees have been abused by their supervisors seem to be common among Nigerian bankers. However, there seem to be dearth of research on the impact of such abuse on positive job behaviors of employees. The focus of this study, therefore, is to examine the relationship that exist between abusive supervision and prosocial behaviors of bank employees in Nigeria. It is hypothesized here that abusive supervision will be negatively related to prosocial behavior of bank employees.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The respondents for this study comprised of 335 bankers drawn from 14 commercial banks in Lagos, Nigeria. Among the participants surveyed, 52.24.76% were women, 52.84% were single while 47.16% were married employees. The participants' age ranged between 21 years and 49 years with mean age of 30.84 years. With regards to educational attainment, 33 had higher degrees, 245 had a minimum of first degree certificate or Higher National Diploma, while 57 had Ordinary National Diploma. The average job tenure was 3.73 years.

### **Instrument**

Two instruments were used in the study. These include the Abusive Supervision Scale and the Pro-Social Behavior Scale.

#### Abusive Supervision Scale

Abusive supervision was measured with Tepper (2000) scale of abusive supervision. Abusive Supervision measure is a 15-item, self-report scale that elicits information on the extent to which subordinates feel that they have been non-physically abused by their supervisor or to indicate the prevalence of supervisor abusive behaviors. The scale is a Likert-type scale with a 5-point format ranging from 1 (I cannot remember him/her using this behavior with me), 2 (He/she very seldom uses this behavior with me), 3 (She/he occasionally uses these behavior with me), 4 (He/she uses this behavior moderately often with me), to 5 (He/she uses this behavior often with me. Sample items include "My supervisor tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid," or "My supervisor puts me down in front of others." The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .89.

#### The Pro-Social behavior Scale.

Pro-social behavior was measured with a 20-item scale developed by McNeely and Meglino (1994). The measure is a 5-point scale with response categories ranging from 1(never) to 5(always). The pro-social scale is a three-factor model scale representing employees' exhibition of prosocial behavior towards their organizations, co-workers and general role-prescribed prosocial behavior. In the scale, seven items were used to measure prosocial behavior directed to the organization, seven items represented the role-prescribed prosocial behavior, while six items represented prosocial behaviors that are targeted to individuals. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .92.

## Procedure

The instruments were administered to 423 employees from 15 commercial banks in Lagos, Nigeria. The instrument was administered through the Head of Operations, to all the 423 employees in the 15 selected banks. Participation was voluntary. Out of the 423 copies of questionnaire distributed, 347 were properly completed and returned, representing a return rate of 82.03%. Out of the 347 returned, 12 copies of the questionnaire were not correctly completed and were discarded. The remaining 335 responses were therefore used for data analysis.

## Analytical Procedure

Analysis was carried out on the data using hierarchical regression in order to assess the amount of incremental variance explained by the control and the antecedent variables. In the analysis, the control variables (gender, marital status, age, education, tenure) were entered first before entering the antecedent variable, abusive supervision.

## Results

Table 1 contains the results of the means, standard deviations, and correlations of each of the variables.

**Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlation among study variables**

|    | Variable                          | M     | SD    | 1      | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6      | 7     | 8     | 9      | 10 |
|----|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|--------|----|
| 1  | Gender                            | .69   | .48   | 1      |       |       |       |       |        |       |       |        |    |
| 2  | Marital Status                    |       |       | .07    | 1     |       |       |       |        |       |       |        |    |
| 3  | Age                               | 28.43 | 5.61  | -.15** | .51** | 1     |       |       |        |       |       |        |    |
| 4  | Education                         | 19.79 | 25.82 | .06    | .03   | .03   | 1     |       |        |       |       |        |    |
| 5  | Tenure                            | .73   | .44   | -.01   | .31** | .55** | .004  | 1     |        |       |       |        |    |
| 6  | Prosocial organizational behavior | 2.14  | .54   | -.04   | .04   | -.08  | -.13* | .02   | 1      |       |       |        |    |
| 7  | Prosocial Individual Behavior     | 86.95 | 10.87 | -.01   | .04   | .06   | .10   | .02   | .04    | 1     |       |        |    |
| 8  | Role-prescribed behavior          | 60.10 | 8.86  | -.004  | .05   | -.05  | -.04  | .03   | .58**  | .04   | 1     |        |    |
| 9  | Prosocial behavior                | 40.66 | 4.52  | -.03   | .06   | -.04  | -.04  | .03   | .78**  | .55** | .76** | 1      |    |
| 10 | Abusive supervision               |       |       | -.07   | .18** | .13*  | -.03  | .17** | -.22** | -.14* | -.06  | -.20** | 1  |

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

The results of the correlation analyses revealed that among the control variables, only level of education was significantly related with prosocial organizational behavior ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). None of the control variables were significantly related to prosocial behavior and any of the dimensions of prosocial behavior. Abusive supervision was significantly related to prosocial behavior ( $r = -.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ). With regards to the dimensions of prosocial behavior, abusive supervision was also found to be negatively related to pro-organizational behavior ( $r = -.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and pro-individual behavior ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but was not related to pro-role behavior.

**Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analyses predicting prosocial behavior**

| Variables           | 1    | 2      |
|---------------------|------|--------|
| Gender              | -.05 | -.07   |
| Marital status      | .12  | .15    |
| Age                 | -.15 | -.16*  |
| Education           | -.04 | -.05   |
| Tenure              | .07  | .10    |
| Abusive Supervision |      | -.23** |
| R <sup>2</sup>      | .017 | .067   |

Note. The dependent variable for all equations was prosocial behavior. The control variables were coded as follows: Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female), Marital status (1 = Single, 2 = Married), Education (1 = OND or its equivalent, 2 = First degree or its equivalent, 3 = Higher degree). Age and job tenure were keyed in the way the data collected. The raw scores of the participants on prosocial behavior and abusive supervision were coded the way they were collected in such a way that higher scores indicate higher prosocial behavior or higher perception of abusive supervision. \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \* =  $p < .05$

As a block, the control variables (gender, marital status, age, education and job tenure) explained an insignificant 1.7% variance in prosocial behavior. However, the predictor variable, abusive supervision explained 6.7% of the variance in prosocial behavior over and above the control variables ( $\beta = -.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This result is consistent with our hypothesis that abusive supervision will be negatively related with prosocial organizational behavior.

## Discussion

This study shows that the participants who perceived their supervisors as abusive engaged in less prosocial behavior when compared with those who perceived less abusive supervision. These results lend support to the proposition that when employees are treated unfairly by their supervisors that it leads to employees' withdrawal of behaviors that benefits the organization or the supervisor (Ambrose, Seabright & Schminke, 2002). Thus the negative relationship found between abusive supervision and employee prosocial behavior is a demonstration that the participants were reacting to the perceived maltreatment by their supervisor by engaging in less prosocial behavior.

This result is also consistent with the social exchange explanation of work behavior where employees tend to reciprocate good gestures by their supervisors by engaging in behaviors that benefit the organization. In the same manner employees tend to withdraw beneficial organizational behavior when they perceive their supervisors as less supportive. This is consistent with earlier studies (e.g. Ambrose, Seabright & Schminke, 2002; Thau et

al, 2009; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), that demonstrated that when employees perceive their supervisors as abusive they engage less in positive job behaviors.

The finding that abusive supervision does not relate to all dimensions of prosocial behavior in the same manner is also revealing. The results showed that abusive supervision was significantly related to prosocial organizational behavior and prosocial individual behavior but was not significantly related to role-prescribed prosocial behavior. These results may also validate the social exchange model demonstrating that exhibition or withdrawal of prosocial behavior is based on the reciprocity norm. In this circumstance, the workers withdrew only behaviors that benefit the organization and other individuals but not behavior that is directed toward fulfilling their job requirements. It is obvious that workers may be expected to perform role-prescribed behaviors irrespective of their feelings, for these behaviors are required as part of their contractual agreement with the employing organization, but engaging in extra role effort that may be beneficial to the organization or individuals may require that the employees be motivated to engage in such behaviors. These findings have implications for managers of our banks. In order to elicit positive work behavior from employees it may be necessary to treat the employees fairly with a more quality supervision that will make the workers to feel less abused by their superiors.

The interpretation and generalization of the results of this study should be done with caution. This study is a correlational study and the issue of cause and effect relationship was not established. Further studies may explore longitudinal approach or involve experimentation where abusive supervision is manipulated to determine its effect on prosocial behavior. This study also used only self-report measure of abusive supervision and prosocial behavior and therefore may have problems associated with common source bias. However, the anonymity promised and the confidentiality assured to the participants may have reduced this bias. The study also considered one antecedent variable on prosocial behavior. Further studies should include other personal and organizational variables as possible antecedents of prosocial behavior.

Although this study is limited in many ways, it is one of the first major attempts to investigate leadership behaviors and their impact on both individual employees and organizations in the Nigerian banking industry. It is obvious that leadership behavior is critical for organizational survival in the competitive business environment. As financial organizations reenergize after the global financial crises that also affected the Nigerian banking environment, attention should shift to behavior of managers of banks. As abusive supervision has been linked to withdrawal of prosocial behaviors that are targeted to benefit organizations, there is need to educate owners and managers of banks on the negative effects of supervisors' abuse on individual employees and the organizations. A more focused, friendly and quality supervision that will educe positive job attitudes from employees is needed as Nigerian banks join other global financial institutions to evolve strategies that will bring stability to the current fragile world economy.

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