



Revisiting the Dichotomy between Abusive Supervision and Work Performance of Subordinates in Private Organizations in Kenya: An Empirical Search for Correspondence between Theory and Practice

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Authors' contributions

This work is the creation of three authors. Author SF conceptualized the study, reviewed literature, designed instruments and analyzed data. Author AAA pursued permission to conduct research on 10 private organizations in Kenya, offered an appropriate methodology and wrote the protocol, while author KS wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This systematic and empirical review attempted to expand the frontiers of knowledge on abusive supervision against employee performance using private sector as a case sample. Using no mediating model between X and Y, the study focused on the assumed and observable linearity between the two variables under investigation whilst using available quantitative and qualitative data as point of reference. Hypothetically, it is assumed that, abusive supervision has a negative

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correlation with employee performance across organization. This kind of reasoning is guided by observable longitudinal data, feelings and opinions drawn from various categories of individuals over time. Important to note, is the fact that, these observations are in conflict with many research works and reports whose conclusions seem to suggest that abusive supervision has a direct positive causal impact on employee performance. This empirical review is borne out of this contradiction as an attempt to contribute to the ongoing debate and systematically direct reasoning to the desired end. A statistically selected sample of 80 respondents from 101 total population was drawn from 10 private organizations across Kenya for quantitative data and a team of key informants (10) one from each organization was selected for interviews. A mixed method approach was adopted which gave birth to descriptive statistics and thematic approach for analysis. A casual path linking the supervisor mindfulness, supervisor hostility, supervisor attitudes and organizational leadership structures was established. Supervisor hostility and attitudes negatively affected employee performance in the private sector organizations whilst supervisor mindfulness and organizational leadership structures positively affected employee performance in the same context. Important to note is that, although the associations between perceptions of abusive supervision and employee performance appear to be universally negative, the magnitude of the relationship between perceptions of abusive supervision and employee performance varies according to the study design, context, culture and timing. Great need is sought to continuously harmonize the synergy between theory and practice for the future of the practitioners rests entirely on this evaluation.

Keywords: Abusive supervision; cyber-loafing; hedonic adaptation; work performance; supervisor mindfulness; supervisor hostility; supervisor attitudes and organizational leadership structures.

1. INTRODUCTION

Supervisors play an important role in the direction, evaluation, and coaching of employees. Some supervisors are supportive, fostering subordinates' abilities and empowering them to achieve their goals [1]. In contrast, other supervisors humiliate, belittle, or otherwise treat subordinates derisively (i.e., abusive supervision). Subordinates who perceive their supervisors as abusive are more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors directed toward both the supervisor and the organization, as well as to reduce discretionary behaviors carried out on behalf of the organization [2]. Abusive supervision is defined as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" [3].

There is compelling evidence that abusive supervision results in negative employee attitudes, behaviors, and psychological health [4]. However, recipients of abusive supervision hold the organization itself partly responsible as majority tend to assume that it's their duty to safe guard the integrity of the organization through this inhuman approach [5]. In this regard, abusive supervision is negatively related to

affective organizational commitment to command employees into obedience whereas not in reality due to its counterproductive attributes [6].

Abusive supervision is a significant issue confronting organizations today in varying degree and majority of the perpetrators seem to find no negative connotation with the practice [2]. For the immediate target, the situation is no less dire insofar as supervisory abuse negatively affects the physical and psychological wellbeing of both victims and their families [7]. Given the far-reaching impact of abusive supervision, researchers need to better understand the antecedents of abusive supervision in order to minimize its occurrence, as well as to better understand when and why the detrimental consequences of abusive supervision can be mitigated.

It is reported that subordinate's hostility towards a supervisor is highlighted as the mediating process impelling supervisors to act abusively towards poor performing subordinates [8]. This observation however, seems to ignore the fact that some supervisors depending on their orientation, origin, education status, philosophy of work and so on, choose to apply this model for in their world of practice is the best ever. With

this approach, subordinates can increase the amount of discretionary effort they give to the job [9]. Many studies seem to agree on this; however in reality the situation is quite opposite as many firms have shut down because of these actions which in the beginning are not given utmost attention. This negative wave consistently and incrementally grows unnoticed towards a negative continuum until the firm is finally shut.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

In this study context, evidence provided in the available literature is sparse and anecdotal concerning the causal pathway connecting or harmonizing theory and practice. The practice seems to be guided by supervisor-subordinate feelings rather than theories, principles and philosophies at the critical time in question [10]. This inconsistent documentation is giving birth to tension in many organizations as practitioners seem to point at the problem but lack sufficient and evidenced-based documented remedy to the vice [11]. Evidently observed in all the organizations under investigation is the fact that, majority of the supervisors exercise abusive supervision unnoticed whilst others find it interesting because it attracts immediate positive feedback from the subordinates [12]. Prior to this study, reports had indicated that, productivity of some organizations like Turskys Supermarket Kenya, Airtel Kenya, Equity Bank Kenya, Daystar university to mention but a few, was consistently declining despite huge sums of money invested [12]. Available studies on this decline all point at finance related aspects with little or no attention offered on the psychological DNA of these firms. Despite less attention, organizational psychology is critical today as it is cited as one of the major factors leading to increased strain e.g., emotional exhaustion [11], reduction in affective well-being [12], and low-quality interpersonal exchanges [13]. On the other hand, abusive supervision has also been positively associated with subordinates' proclivities to engage in dysfunctional behaviors at work (e.g., workplace deviance; and at home e.g., work to-family conflict; [14]. It is further observed that cyberloafing, social loafing and resentment for work among employees in Kenya private firms is partly attributed to the abusive strategies adopted by the supervisors [15]. However, its actual impact in the said firms is not well established due to sparse studies so far conducted in the same

organizations, and the fact that, no credible firm has closed her operations in the region due to abusive supervision, its impact on organizational survival is misjudged.

On the account of evaluation (theory and practice) it is evident that literature to guide practice in as far as Kenya private firms are concerned is sparse and isolated [16]. Practice is guided by supervisor's feelings and temper of the situation at hand, rather than well-drawn context specific procedures, principles and policies [17]. The psychological backbone of organizations is mutedly talked about and barely respected [18], the supervisor-subordinate gap is wide and no one seems to be aware of the danger these organizations are bound to face [19]. The theory-practice gap, the methodological, temporal, and contextual gaps all have stimulated the need for this study.

2.1 General Research Objective

The purpose of this study was to establish the effect of abusive supervision on work performance of subordinates in private organizations in Kenya.

2.2 Specific Objectives

1. To examine the effect of supervisor mindfulness on work performance of subordinates in private organizations in Kenya.
2. To assess the effect of supervisor hostility on work performance of subordinates in private organizations in Kenya
3. To establish the effect of supervisor attitude on work performance of subordinates in private organizations in Kenya.
4. To determine the effect of organizational leadership on work performance of subordinates in private organizations in Kenya

2.3 Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework explains the linkages between the independent and dependent variables. In view of this diagram, it is assumed that the independent variables predict a linear association with the dependent variable. Any unit increase in one of the independent variables predicts a change in the dependent variable.

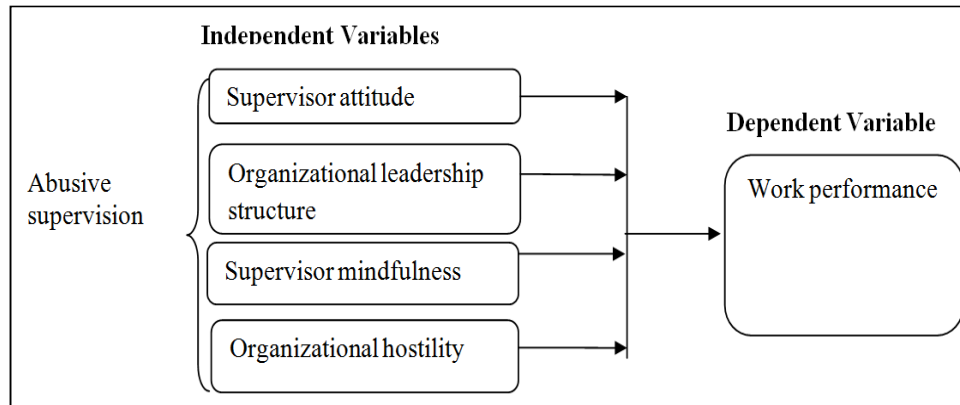


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework on abusive supervision and employee performance

2.4 Research Methodology

This systematic review utilized a descriptive research approach. The review systematically searches, identifies, selects, appraises, and synthesizes research evidence relevant to the question using methodology that is explicit, reproducible, and leads to bias minimization [20]. This research design entails observation as well as description of the behavior of the elements under investigation without necessarily interfering with it [21]. This observation and analysis of events was mounted in various organizations such as; telecommunication (Airtel Kenya), banking (Equity Bank), Media houses (Standard Group), Education (Daystar University), Health (Agha Khan Hospital), Real Estate (Lloyd Masika), Logistics (DHL), Manufacturing (Delmonte), Horticulture (Finlay Flowers Ltd) and retail business (Tuskys Supermarkets). These companies were selected basing on the following criteria; they had to be private and spent a minimum of 5 years in operation at the time of this study.

2.5 Population and Sampling Technique

From these institutions, the researcher scientifically selected a statistical representative sample of 80 participants out of 101 total population. In each company, these categories were considered for the study; (1 section head, 4 supervisors and 5 immediate subordinates). The study further sought attention from the Chairman in charge of the Association for Private Investors hence making a total of 101 target population. Consideration of these categories was guided by the HR Departments in all the companies under study. The statistical selection sample for this

study was guided by the Solovein's formula $n=N/1+N(0.005)^2$.

2.6 Interview Method

This method was used to obtain the non-numeric information using face to face sessions between the researcher and interviewees. The method supported the researcher in designing an interview guide with open ended questions about the study. The choice for the method is that it provides in-depth or valuable information about the study that other methods cannot avail. It is more accurate though time consuming [21]. A total of 10 key informants (one from each company) was obtained for qualitative responses to compliment quantitative data method.

2.7 Instrumentation

The study utilized self-administered questionnaires for quantitative data collection. This method is known for being cheap and simple for primary data collection [20]. A pre-content test for validity was conducted using a pilot survey consisting of 12 respondents purposively chosen from private companies in Kenya. The Cronbach alpha was also adopted for reliability testing.

2.8 Measurement of Variables

The 4 level Likert scale was used to control variability in this study. This method was found appropriate due to its flexibility, accuracy and simplicity. This scale can be constructed more easily and accurately than most other types of attitude scale [21].

Table 1. The 4 level likert scale

Mean range	Response range	Interpretation
3.26-4.00	Strongly agree	Very high
2.51-3.25	Agree	High
1.76-2.50	Disagree	Low
1.00-1.75	Strongly disagree	Very low

2.9 Data Collection and Analysis

This research made use of self-administered questionnaires in gathering the required primary quantitative data whilst, interview guide was used to collect qualitative data. Documentary review to appreciate the existing knowledge on the problem under investigation was equally done. The gathered data were coded and analyzed using multiple regression.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to predict the effect of abusive supervision on work performance of subordinates. The predictors included supervisor mindfulness, supervisor hostility, supervisor attitude, organizational leadership structure, and whilst the observable effect was on work performance of subordinates. The regression analysis here below provides responses from various categories of employees from 10 sampled private companies across Kenya.

To determining whether work performance of subordinates is a function of abusive supervision, a multiple linear regression analysis which determines the magnitude of the effect and connection among variables was run. Findings revealed that while all the four constructs of the independent variable are correlated with work performance of subordinates, pose a positive significant effect. The r^2 is 0.766 meaning that while all the four items of the independent variable are considered, cause a positive change in the dependent variable equivalent to 76.6%. Implying that the excluded independent variables had a less impact on the dependent variable.

From the multiple linear analysis, it was therefore clear that $Y = a - \beta_1 + \beta_2 + \beta_3 - \beta_4$ where Y = dependent variable, a = constant, β = independent variables (β_1 = supervisor attitude, β_2 = organizational leadership structures, β_3 = supervisor mindfulness, and β_4 = supervisor hostility all together had a positive effect on the dependent variable. This further suggests that, a unit

increase in supervisor attitude causes a decreased change in work performance equivalent to -0.619, a unit increase in organizational leadership structure attracts a positive change in work performance equivalent to 0.755, a unit increase in supervisor mindfulness attracts a positive increase equal to 0.879 and finally a unit increase in supervisor hostility will cause a decrease in work performance equivalent to -0.712.

Positive aspects of supervision play the role of generating trust that would fulfill its exchange obligations of employees for contributing their efforts towards organizational success while the contrary inhibits performance. The regression model revealed that abused subordinates perform poorly than their non-abused counterparts. At the time of this study, private companies in Kenya were operating in an environment of stiff competition where supervisors and subordinates were both under pressure to meet deadlines. This was observed as one of the reasons of increased stress levels and a sound reason why supervisors unintentionally exhibit abusive behaviors.

Specifically, the study found out that supervisor mindfulness has a positive impact on subordinate's response to work. It was observed at the time of the study, that in cases where supervisors exhibited mindful strategies in job processes, many subordinates performed to their expectations.

The study also established that there is a negative link between supervisor hostility and employee performance, inferring challenges for decision-making policy towards improving constructive workplace behaviors and proficiencies. Also, the study revealed that supervisor hostility is capable of creating social disintegration at the workplace. This may largely be due to the power distance that exists between employers and employees in private organizations coupled with labor laws that have failed to protect vulnerable employees.

The study further found that supervisor attitude had a negative contribution to employee

performance in Kenya. This suggested that, a unit increase in supervisor's attitude correlates with a decreased change in employee performance. It is therefore important to consider revisiting attitude at the work place because of its ability to attract negative work-related responses from the subordinates.

The study found out that organizational leadership structures play a significant role in enhancing abusive supervisory in private institutions. From the study, subordinate and supervisory behaviour is conditioned by the work environment in which interactions take place, and the consequences of misunderstood and inappropriate responses in cyclical interpersonal interactions can be seriously compounded over time. This underscored the essence of establishing a collegial workplace with shared opportunities and social bonding ties. A situation where employees cannot stand up and speak up for fear of being victimized is not in tandem with global practices and has negative connotation for intangible resources such as social capital.

Finally, employees confronted with a working environment littered with abusive supervisors seemed less competitive and attractive to new comers (new employee). It was confusing at the time of the study that, in companies where it is common knowledge that supervisors are rude, employees were performing normally and new applicants were fighting vacancies in such companies. This observation sends a critical signal that needs an immediate investigation. Could it be that over mistreatment made subordinates immune? Is it because of surplus labor in the market space? Is it because of the high levels of unemployment that people fear to risk their jobs and willingly surrender their rights for harsh working environments?

Work environments perceived by the subordinate to be abusive are likely to engender feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability [22]. In the general workplace setting, abuse is rarely expected or accepted as part of the work process. Being privately ridiculed, insulted, or intentionally sabotaged by your supervisor provokes feelings of uncertainty. In such circumstances, an employee may spend a great deal of time and effort trying to navigate the workplace. The study found that having an abusive supervisor makes subordinate workers more likely to drink more alcohol, feel powerless, have lower self-esteem, feel paranoid, feel emotionally exhausted, have lower job satisfaction and wellbeing and other negative

outcomes (such as cyber-loafing, stealing workplace items and/or sabotaging organizational goals). This was revealed in the quantitative data as well as interviews held with the key informants. Hostility placed on subordinates coupled with weird attitude, aggregately affect work productivity and subsequently affect the survival of the firm. This observation is consistent with various researchers whose conclusions contain the fact that poor attitude at the workplace is a gateway to decadence [23]. Using the quantitative primary data for this study, one can ably see that an increase in hostility or attitude predicts a decrease in the level of work performance. This finding is consistent with the interview findings, which established that, any form of negativity perceived by the employees from the supervisors, attracts equal proportion of negative response from the employees.

In rare cases, some key informants deluded to assume that some supervisors just find themselves abusive due to stress imposed onto them by endless demands from the superiors. Much as this may be the case, how come other supervisors keep their cool even in the time of turbulence? It is illogical to conclude that, too much stress can lead them into this trap. The nature of their position is so demanding and this is made clear right from the application stage before being appointed as a supervisor, then why this attitude? Could it be said that, they lack emotional intelligence?

The study established that supervisors represent a proximal source of information that is particularly relevant to employees' standing in the private organizations and provide cues that help to reduce vagaries. A subordinate who perceives supervisory abuse may not feel comfortable turning to his/her supervisor to gain information about the context. An abused subordinate may not be able to rely on his/her supervisor for cues because the supervisor may actually be the source of the uncertainty and unpredictability [24]. The negative performance provides a key concern for organizations to be concerned about allowing abusive supervision to go unchecked. This corroborates with the interviews, that much as, abusive supervision can achieve temporary success, using it as tool for results is a misguided strategy. It should be perhaps reserved for temporary projects which require limited span of time for accomplishment due to its ability to attract results on a temporary scale.

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis

Aspect	Value				
Model	1				
R	0.872				
R Square	0.766				
Adjusted R Square	0.751				
Std. Error of the Estimate	0.573				
Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. error	Beta		
(Constant)	4.778	0.453		10.5475	0.0429
Supervisor attitude	-0.619	0.145	-0.103	4.2690	0.0339
Organizational leadership structures	0.755	0.126	0.054	5.9921	0.0210
Supervisor mindfulness	0.879	0.108	0.029	8.1389	0.0133
Supervisor hostility	-0.712	0.137	-0.064	5.1971	0.0264

For subordinates who remained with their jobs, abusive supervision was associated with lower job and life satisfaction, lower normative and affective commitment, and higher continuance commitment, conflict between work and family, and psychological distress. Organizational justice mediated most of these effects, and job mobility moderated some of the deleterious effects of abusive supervision.

4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that supervisors can increase productivity as a result of the employees' commitment that, in turn, can increase the amount of discretionary effort employees give to the job. However, abusive supervision represents a form of supervisors' self-control failure which builds to employee victimization. Abusive supervision trickles down from mistreated supervisors to subordinates. The relationship between abusive supervision and employee performance is moderated by organizational climate, suggesting that an abuse-intolerant climate heightens rather than buffering the effects of abuse on subordinates. This violation also affects the relationship between abuse and the outcome variables. To some companies where key positions are occupied by relatives and friends, abusive supervision was found prevalent and order of the day. In few instances where it was found relevant, it was still hard to establish its total impact on the assumed success. Again, it seemed to work well in inferior companies with inferior employees whose survival beyond those companies is doubtful. They succumb to psychological torture and physical abuses due to lack of employment alternatives while, others fear the unknown associated with new employment.

5. RECOMMENDATION

There is need for organizational justice in private sector to enable subordinate employees have a sense of fairness and dignity. To reinforce this, there is need to have strong employee associations to front employee concerns whenever they arise. As it is right now, it is hard to fight for employee space because there is no active policy on this at the national level. The private sector needs to undertake various measures to enhance its employee performance with regard to supervision. The private sector should establish the harmonized decision making procedures and eliminate the existing loopholes to facilitate a more rapid decision making process.

Measures against abusive practices at the work place need to be reinforced by all concerned actors such as law enforcement officers, labor organizations, local and international human rights agencies among others. It is quite regrettable to find employees getting used to mistreatment at the work place because of no options for employment alternatives. In addition, trade unions could be involved in preventing and combating abusive practices in the workplace as they are often in the position to document abuse, deal with complaints, and provide help to workers. Again, there is need to wire and build a strong psychological DNA at the workplace that supports human interaction, dignity and freedom for the goodwill of mankind.

There is a need for increased understanding that abusive practice in the workplace is an outdated practice whose credence is suspect. Supervisors need to continuously create workplace contrasts to allow employees get rid of the boredom that in

many cases cause hedonic adaption and its associated adverse effects.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

The researchers adhered to ethical guidelines at all stages, mainly concerning participants' anonymity, confidentiality and freedom. Others include citations and authority from relevant institutions to collect data. Additionally, the study purpose was explained to all the participants and confidentiality of their responses was assured.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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