

# THE ROLE OF SUPERVISOR PERCEIVED INTENT AS A MODERATOR IN THE IMPACT OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION ON EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION AND TURNOVER INTENTION

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**ABSTRACT:** *Abusive supervision has been a rising issue over the past decades because of its negative consequences for subordinates. Due to abusive supervision, much unwanted behavior is shown by employees which really damage the moral and satisfaction of both the employees and the employer. Abusive supervision has got negative outcomes such as low job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion and high turnover intention. Further, the moderator like hostile intent of supervisor can really play an important role in the impact of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion and subordinates turnover intention. The purpose of this study is to find out the moderating role of hostile intent in the impact of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion and subordinates turnover intention. Data was collected from 228 employees of different private health sector organizations in Islamabad and Rawalpindi to address the variables of abusive supervision, hostile intent, emotional exhaustion, turnover intention and power distance. Regression and correlation analysis was performed to test the hypothesized relationship between the study variables. Results found that abusive supervision significantly affect subordinates emotional exhaustion and their turnover intention. Also the hostile intent of supervisors was found to significantly moderate the impact of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. The study provides worthwhile managerial implications along with possible future research directions.*

**Key words:** Abusive supervision, emotional exhaustion, turnover intention and hostile intent.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent literature has given much attention to abusive behavior that take place in working environment. This behavior has been referred as organization behavior's dark side [1]. Researchers have suggested that non-violent aggression at work place is increasing [2]. Hence previous researchers on leadership have tried to uncover the characteristics of persons who can lead most effectively and have focused on positive behavior of leaders and its effects through studying the most famous concepts such as transformational leadership, e.g., [3], ethical leadership [4] and authentic leadership [5]. However, research also suggests that abusive leadership, being the darker side of leadership is also there [6].

The growing interest in dark side of the leadership has got two important and main reasons. The first reason is the cost related to the leadership dark side which organizations incur. For example, almost 13.6 percent workers are affected due to abusive supervision in US companies and \$23.8 billion cost incurs to these companies in terms of frequent turnover, low productivity and employees absenteeism [7]. The second main reason for growing research in this area is the severe damaging effects of destructive behavior of leaders on the individuals who face it such as emotional exhaustion and job tension [8], low job satisfaction and intention to quit the organization [7], loss to family well being [9], deviant work behavior [10] and employees resistant behavior [11]. The reason of prevalence and having serious outcomes which suffer both the employees and the organizations make it an important phenomenon to be investigated deeper.

Researchers have used many concepts to investigate destructive behavior of leaders. Tepper [7] used the concept of "abusive supervision", while Ashforth [12] called it "Petty

tyranny", referring to leaders who humiliate their followers and behave with them in destructive manner in face of public and express non verbal aggression on them [13]. One of those behaviors is abusive supervision which has got much attention of the researchers over past decade and the destructive consequences of such improper behavior shown by leader / supervisor at work place [14,15].

Research evidence suggests that abusive supervision has significant negative effects on the outcome of workers at workplace since it creates interpersonal aberrance [16] and also it has effects on lower job performance [17]. The wide research on abusive supervision shows that it affects the desire outcome of workplace and damages it [18]. The effects of abusive supervision may not be as much as physically harmful but it is more likely to leave long lived wounds [19]. It has been suggested by several researchers that causal attribution have important role in subordinate response to abusive supervision [20], but less attention has been paid to the intentionality aspect of subordinate belief or perception about his / her supervisor behavior. More simply, it means the extent to which subordinates think that supervisor is deliberately involved in abusing with them [21]. While previous studies have directly assessed the effects of abusive behaviors of supervisors, the fact that how abused the subordinates perceive the abusive behavior of supervisor is of primary significance. As stated by Eschleman, et al. [21], a supervisor may use abusive language or may be involved in abusive supervision with the intention to either harm his/her subordinate (hostile intent) or maybe he is involved in abusive behavior with the intention to motivate subordinate to have better performance (motivational intent). For example an abusive supervisor may use abusive behavior or he may ridicule his subordinate in order to embarrass or hurt him (a

hostile intent), or may use abusive behavior in order to motivate the subordinate which is called a motivational intent [21]. Hence, the current study focuses on the perceived hostile intent of supervisor as a moderator in the impact of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. It is proposed that relationship between abusive supervisor, emotional exhaustion and turnover intention will depend on hostile intent [21]. To further clarify the moderating role of perceived hostile intent of the supervisors, the scope of the study extends to different organizations in health sector.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Abusive Supervision*

Abusive supervision concept had been initiated by Tepper [22] who says that abusive supervision is the amount to which employees in organization feel that their supervisors are involved in aggressive behavior with them which can be both verbal and non-verbal and it excludes physical aggression. If supervisor is involved in abusive supervision, it can damage the working environment and productivity of employees. Blau [23] much earlier suggested that when one person does a favor to another person, he/she perceives and expects future return for it. According to Robinson [24] when employees think that they are abused and not treated fairly, they respond to it and show similar behavior to their subordinates by abusing them. Literature suggests that abused employees have dissatisfaction with their jobs and may involve in activities which can suffer organizational productivity. Even employees can suffer from psychological problems and physical illness such as severe stress and conflict between work and family [23]. Liu *et al.* [25] suggested that due to abusive supervision interpersonal deviance can occur. If they are not treated good and fairly and they are abused, they will get involved in negative behavior at workplace which will lead to negative attitude toward others as well as greater frustration among the abused employees. In short, numerous researches on abusive supervision have identified negative results of abusive supervision ranging from increased anxiety, emotion exhaustion and work-family conflict, low job satisfaction, and increased cost to the organizations [26,27].

### *Abusive Supervision and Emotional Exhaustion*

Emotional exhaustion is a system of psychological strain which according to Maslach and Leiter [28] refers to when one becomes overstrain and feels low physical and emotional resources. According to Moore [29], emotional exhaustion refers to when one is exposed to specific job demands for long time, so he/she will have mentally and emotionally low energy. It happens when one feels that he/she does not have enough resources to deal with the job which is required from him/her. Emotional exhaustion is one of the three components of employees' burnout (psychological syndrome which is caused due to interpersonal stressor in the workplace [30]. The other two components are depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. The former refers to when one is isolated or having interpersonal distance; while the later refers to one's effectiveness in terms of working and fulfilling job responsibilities are reduced [31]. Display of emotions

during work has been integral and important requirement as it affects work related outcomes for both employees and organization [31]. Those employees who are emotionally exhausted or having the feelings of lack of energy and low resources are not capable of giving effective performance during their jobs and also they will have higher intention to leave the organization [32]. A number of growing researches evidence that employee turnover attitude during work and emotional exhaustion is significantly related [33]. According to Cropanzano, Rupp and Byrne [34], emotional exhaustion decrease employees' organizational commitment and negatively affects their job performance as well as their organization citizenship behavior. As an important factor of burnout [35], emotional exhaustion is common among individuals who work in such a place where roles are more demanding both physically and mentally [36]. According to Garman, Corrigan and Morris [37], emotional exhaustion is a factor that affects organizational performance outcome e.g. client care and satisfaction in organizations related to human service.

Abusive supervision is linked to emotional exhaustion as a workplace stressor [8]. Literature evidences that the relation between emotional exhaustion and abusive supervision is mostly deduced from the abusive supervisor and abused subordinate interpersonal grievances [8]. The unwanted result may have negative effects on the abused subordinate which then results in low energy and low emotional resources to deal with such type of situation [38]. According to Wright and Hobfoll [38], subordinates are emotionally exhausted when they feel that they are having no more required resources to control, predict and understand the stressor that hit them. When employees become hopeless of future outcome from interaction with their supervisor, they will take no more interest in using the energy and resources in taking feedback from their supervisor [39]. Hence, the subordinate abusive feelings has a dual effects on him / her such that abusive behavior of supervisor not only make the abused employees hopeless and less motivated about future outcome but also reduce his mental resources leading to greater emotional exhaustion in the employees. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

**H1:** *Abusive supervision is significantly related to subordinates emotional exhaustion*

### *Abusive Supervision and Turnover Intention*

When employees of organization move beyond the boundaries of organization, it refers to employee turnover [40]. There are three essential parts of the word turnover intention in the withdrawal cognition process, first one refers to when employees have thoughts of quitting the job, second is when employee intent to search for different jobs and the last one is when they intent to quit the job [41]. According to Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski and Erez [42], the cost related to employees' turnover is very high especially in service providing industries as they have to incur orientation and training cost too. It suggests that employee retention in service industry is even more important. Employees' turnover intentions have been of major interest in the management literature. After enduring a negative experience in the

workplace (abusive supervision), employees may evaluate the situation and question whether to remain in the employment relationship [43]. It is likely that if they perceive injustice in the relationship after an abusive supervisory experience and contemplate future mistreatment of the same kind, they will look for employment elsewhere. According to Zapf and Gross [44], abusive supervision develops and intensify as time goes on. It may start from a conflict between two persons and then reach at high point of intensification. They also suggest that abusive behavior change over time. Most of the abuse starts with strategies to solve a conflict in constructive manner, then the strategy may change several times and finally the abused try to quit and leave the organization. According to Liu et al. [24], abusive supervision affects employees' organization citizenship behavior (OCB) and task performance negatively, while it relates positively to emotional exhaustion and employee turnover. According to Tepper [23], abusive supervision has got direct negative effects on turnover intention which implies that those employees who experience abusive supervision are more likely to leave the organization. Hence, the more the abusive supervision, the higher will be employees' turnover intentions. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

**H2:** *Abusive supervision is significantly related to subordinates turnover intention*

**Hostile Intent**

Although the employees who suffered from abusive supervision are expected to respond to the abusive supervision and have revenge, but the response is likely to vary from one subordinate to another. More specifically, it can be said that the believes of abused subordinate about the abusive supervision that why such behavior occurred will influence the extent to which the violation of psychological contract occur and this in turn will determine the subordinate behavioral response to such an act. This has been termed as causal attribution [45]. Conceptual models of abusive behavior sufficiently evidence the importance of employee's attribution [46] [47]. According to Bowling and Beehr [46] abused subordinate makes attribution with reference to the harassment causes, which can be the supervisor, the organization and the victim himself. So these attributions may affect the victim reaction to the destructive behavior, which may take the form of reporting of such action or simply quitting the job. Models also suggest that employees may show certain negative reaction to the supervisor abuse, but such emotional reactions are partially dependent on intent attribution. Kent and Martinko [45] refer intent as an actor perceived motivational state. The above mentioned models however do not differentiate between different intent types. According to Dasborough and Ashkanasy [48], the dimensions of intentionality depends on the perception of subordinate that how he / she perceives it, whether he / she perceives such behavior as an act for his own development in the career or perceives it as supervisor act for being serving as supervisor. According to Neuman and Baron [49], the supervisors' different form of intent is just like the differentiation between instrumental aggression and hostile. Hostile means the intention to harm while the other (instrumental aggression) refers to goals which are beyond

harming anyone. The present study focuses on hostile intent which according to Eschleman *et al.* [21] refers to when subordinate perceives that he/she has been abused by the supervisor because supervisor wants to demotivate and humiliate him/her.

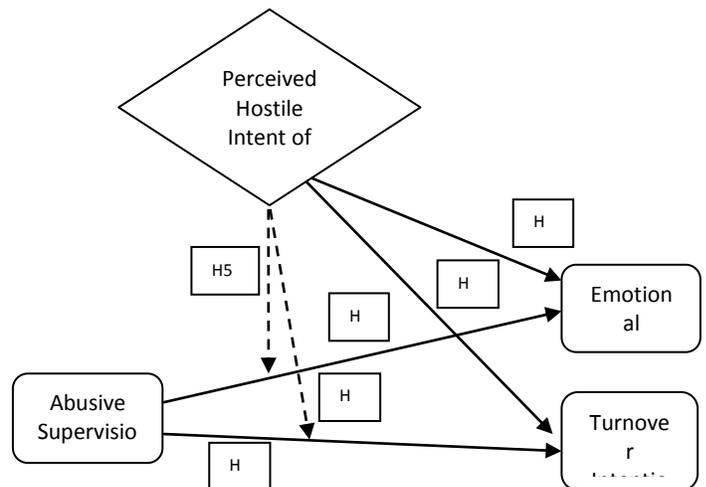
To describe how hostile intent affects emotional exhaustion and turnover intention directly and how it moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and its impact on emotional exhaustion and turnover intention, we go back to the discussion of psychological contract violation which occurs when supervisor is involved in abusive supervision with subordinates. According to Aselage & Eisenberger [50], psychological contract is violated when abusive social exchange occurs as a hostile act, so subordinate may perceive unfairness in their interpersonal relation with supervisor. They may perceive that the supervisor is trying to be unfair with them, which in turn violates psychological contract. Hence, it is more likely that as a result of abusive supervision, when subordinates perceive and believe that the abusive behavior from the supervisor was hostile, abusive supervision will show stronger impact on emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. Further, it also implies that hostile intent will lead to increased emotional exhaustion and turnover intention as subordinate will perceive negative intention of supervisor and will think that supervisor is involved in abusive supervision to humiliate him and hence psychological contract violation will occur. Thus, in the light of above arguments, this study hypothesizes that:

**H3:** *Hostile Intent will significantly affect emotional exhaustion*

**H4:** *Hostile Intent will significantly affect employees' turnover intention.*

**H5:** *Hostile intent will significantly moderate the relation between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion such that higher the hostile intent, stronger will be the relation.*

**H6:** *Hostile intent will significantly moderate the relation between abusive supervision and turnover intention such that higher the hostile intent, stronger will be the relation.*



**Figure 1: Moderating Role of Perceived Hostile Intent of Supervisor over the relationship of Abusive supervision, Emotional Exhaustion and Subordinates Turnover Intention**

### Proposed Theoretical / Conceptual Framework

Based on literature discussion, the following theoretical framework between abusive supervision, supervisor hostile intent, emotional exhaustion and turnover intention is proposed.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Study Organizations, Data Collection and Analysis

To check the effects of perceived hostile intent of supervisor when employees believe that supervisor is involved in abusive supervision having the intent to harm the employee as a moderator on the impact of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion and turnover intention, questionnaires were distributed in private health sector organizations of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The organizations included in survey were Quaid-e-Azam hospital, Shifa International Hospital, Maroof International hospital, Hamdard hospital and other private health organizations also. The private as well as professional links of the supervisor, the authors were capable to get access to employees in the above mentioned private sector organizations. A letter was sent to the concerned employees of the organization and was asked if they are willing to take part in the survey. After getting positive response, the data was collected in person from employees of the above mentioned organizations. Those employees were selected who have spent more than 6 months in the organization, in order to insure that they have got enough exposure to the supervisors and environment of the organization. In order to collect the data from respondents having the required characteristics, the judgmental sampling technique was used in this study.

The study measures were borrowed from literature such that abusive supervision was measured with scale containing fifteen questions on five point likert scale adopted from Tepper [7] and Eschleman *et al.* [21]. Emotional exhaustion was measured with five likert scale containing nine questions [51,52]. Turnover Intention was measured with 3 item five point likert scales developed by Kelloway, Gottlieb, and Barham's [53]. To measure the effects of moderating variable, the power distance scale containing five questions on likert scale was adopted from Eschlemana *et al.* [21].

SPSS was used to find out the required results. First ANOVA was run to identify control variables. Also descriptive statistics was used to find out the mean and standard deviation of demographics and all variables of the study. Correlation was run to find out the relation between independent variable, dependent variable and the moderator. Finally to test the hypotheses of the study, regression analysis was run.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Analysis

Out of total 300 questionnaires, 228 were successfully (76%) returned among which 134 (58.7%) were 'Male' and 94 (41.3%) were 'Female'. Employees having age range from 21-30 years were 83 (36.4%), 31-40 years were 80 (35.1%), 41-50 years were 40 (17.5%) and employees above 50 years of age were 25 (11%). Table 1 below shows that participants had different education level and those who participated were

having bachelor, master, M.Phil and PhD degrees. Research participants having bachelor's degrees were 39 (17.1%), master degrees holders were 87 (38.2%), M.Phil degrees holders were 77 (33.7%) while the participants having PhD were 25 (11%). Of the total research participants, 97 (42.6%) were married and 131 (57.4%) were unmarried.

### Correlation, Mean, SD and Cronbach Alpha

The inter-item consistency for all the measures of the study was measured through Cronbach alpha. The Cronbach alpha of abusive supervision, emotional exhaustion, turnover intention and hostile intent remained .95, .82, .87 and .92 respectively which shows high reliability of the measuring instrument.

A general relationship among the study variables was tested through a correlation analysis which is shown in table 2 below. The correlation data shows that there is a significant relation between abusive supervision (AS) and emotional exhaustion (EE) which indicates a relationship between these two variables.

**Table 1**

Mean, S.D, Correlation, reliability

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Age	2.03	0.99				
Gender	1.48	0.5				
Education	2.38	0.89				
Marital Status	1.78	0.85				
1)AS	3.2	1.25	0.95			
2)EE	2.67	1.11	.61***	0.82		
3)TI	2.66	1.12	.58***	.42***	0.87	
4)HI	3.13	1.25	.21**	.54***	.56***	0.92

**Note:** N=228, Chronbach alpha reliabilities are shown in parenthesis.

a) Age: 1= 20-30 , 2= 30-40 , 3= 40-50 , 4= 40 or above

b) Gender: 1= Male, 2= Female

c) Education: 1= Bachelor , 2= Master , 3= M.S/M.Phil , 4= Ph.D

d) Marital Status: 1= Married and 2= Unmarried

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

### Regression Analysis: Testing of Hypotheses

To test the H1 of this study, regression analysis was performed. Result shown in table 2 shows that abusive supervision significantly affect emotional exhaustion of employees ( $\beta = .54^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Hence, H1 is supported. H2 was concerned with the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' turnover intention. Results found a significant relationship between the two ( $\beta = .53^{***}$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and hence H2 is also supported. H3 stated a significant relationship between hostile intent and emotional exhaustion and the results found the same significant connection between the two ( $\beta = 0.48^{***}$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and H3 was therefore supported. The beta values and significance level for H4 as shown in table 4 below also substantiate a significant relationship between the hostile intent of the supervisor and employees turnover intention ( $\beta = .50^{***}$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and hence H4 is supported.

To test the moderation effects of hostile intent on abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion (H5) as well as abusive supervision and employees' turnover intention, the Baron and Kenny [53] moderation rules were applied. In case of moderation for hostile intent over abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion (H5) as shown in table 4, the  $\beta$  value for the relationship between abusive supervision and

**Table 2: Model Summary**

Steps	Emotional Exhaustion (H5)				Turnover Intention (H6)			
	B	R <sup>2</sup>	t	F	β	R <sup>2</sup>	t	F
AS	<b>0.54</b>	<b>0.37</b>	11.6	135.3	<b>0.53</b>	<b>0.34</b>	10.9	119.4
HI	0.48	0.29	9.7	94.4	0.50	0.31	10.2	104.8
MOD	<b>0.65</b>	<b>0.42</b>	7.09	154.7	<b>0.61</b>	<b>0.41</b>	5.0	134.5

emotional exhaustion increased from 0.54 to 0.65 when hostile intent was regressed against emotional exhaustion ( $p < 0.05$ ) which evidences a moderation effect of hostile intent between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion relationship. Similarly, to test moderation of hostile intent over the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' turnover intention, the beta value increased from 0.53 to 0.61 ( $p < 0.05$ ) which evidences a moderation effect of hostile intent between abusive supervision and employees' turnover intention relationship. Thus, both the moderating hypotheses (H5 and H6) are also supported.

**DISCUSSION**

Consistent with past literature on abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion, the findings of this study relate with previous researchers [7,8,13]. This research also shows that employees in organizations suffering from abusive supervision are highly emotionally exhausted and directly related to abusive supervision such that if employees are more abused by their supervisors, they will have high emotional exhaustion compared to those who are less abused. Similarly, Liu *et al.* [16], Zapf and Gross [44], Turnley and Feldman [43] and Tepper [7] found that abusive supervision has got direct effects on employees' turnover intention. The results of this study are thus in accordance with the literature. This study also supported the hypotheses that hostile intent will significantly affect emotional exhaustion and employees' turnover intention. Further, the hostile intent of supervisor will moderate and strengthen the relationship between abusive supervision and its effects on emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. According to Bowling and Beehr [20], abused subordinates make attribution with reference to harassment causes which can be the supervisor, the organization or the victim himself. The findings of this study imply that subordinate in reference to abusive supervision make attribution to himself / herself and get emotionally exhausted and they intent to leave the organization. This also indicates the violation of psychological contract which occurs when abusive social exchange occurs as a hostile act and so subordinate may perceive unfairness in their interpersonal relation with his / her supervisor. Abusive supervision was more strongly related with emotional exhaustion and turnover intention when subordinates perceive that the supervisor is involved in abusive supervision in order to harm them and humiliate them. Hence, it also implies that as a result of abusive supervision, when subordinates perceive that the abusive behavior from the supervisor side was a hostile act, abusive supervision will show stronger impact on emotional exhaustion and turnover intention.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The study only targeted one dimension of the perceived intent of supervisor that is hostile intent. In future, other dimension of abusive supervision, that is, motivational intent should be studied as a moderator. Second, the data collected was cross sectional and collected at one time while in future longitudinal (time series) data can be collected to check at different point of time to see whether the frequency of emotional exhaustion and turnover intention increases or not. Moreover, the study only targeted emotional exhaustion and turnover intention as outcomes of abusive supervision. Hostile intent may moderate the relationship of abusive supervision and its other outcomes. Thus in future, same study can be conducted, while keeping different outcomes of abusive supervision such as absenteeism and job dissatisfaction.

**MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study reveal that managers and supervisors in any organization should avoid abusive supervision and should not engage in any negative behavior with subordinates as it affects their emotional exhaustion and increase their turnover intention which can lead to actual turnover of employees. To have proper atmosphere and good working environment managers and supervisors should be friendly with their subordinates and should have friendly and proper environment to have more efficient and productive environment. To be more supportive and friendly, organizations should provide trainings to supervisors to have long term good relationship with their subordinates.

The moderating role of perceived hostile intent does play important role in the relationship between abusive supervision, emotional exhaustion and turnover intention of the employees. So whenever supervisor is involved in abusive supervision, it depends on the perception of abused subordinate that how they perceive such type of behavior. They can perceive such behavior as motivational intent as well as hostile intent. Therefore supervisors should avoid such behavior because subordinates can perceive it as a hostile intent and can think that it is done in order to humiliate him which will negatively affect employees' attitude towards the supervisors and even the organization.

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