

DECODING WORKPLACE DYNAMICS: HOW JOB SATISFACTION, POLITICS, AND COMMUNICATION SHAPE EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

This work examines the well-researched constructs of job satisfaction, perceptions of politics, and perceptions of abusive supervision, and places them within a dual moderated mediation model. The relationship between job satisfaction and perceptions of politics is moderated by supervisor communication, and employee skills moderate the relationship between perceptions of politics and perceptions of abusive supervision. Grounded in conservation of resources theory, the findings confirm that supervisor communication strengthens the buffering effect of job satisfaction on perceptions of politics. Simple dialogue and feedback leave the employee feeling that the organization operates on a level playing field. Furthermore, skills enable employees to negotiate more effectively in a politically charged workplace without perceiving abusive supervision.

Keywords: Job Skill, Job Satisfaction, Perception of Organizational Politics, Abusive Supervision.

Introduction

Employee perceptions are essential in the development of a productive and peaceful workplace. Two such perceptions are politics perception (POP) and abusive supervision perception. POP, defined as the non-meritorious distribution of benefits and resources, is a well-documented stressor (Ferris et al., 2002; Rosen et al., 2009). Similarly, the perception of abusive supervision, which is defined as sustained hostile actions, devaluing, and/or controlling behavior, has been shown to lower morale and productivity (Tepper, 2007). Examining these in concert and the constructs that affect them is essential in creating a workplace that fosters the productivity and innovation needed to compete in the marketplace.

Though both POP and abusive supervision have been well-researched, gaps and tensions remain. For instance, research has concentrated on direct relationships between these constructs and workplace outcomes (Chang et al., 2009). Leaving the contextual and individual factors that affect relationships largely unexamined. As job

satisfaction buffers against workplace stressors (Hobfoll, 1989; Judge et al., 2001), its utility in mitigating the effects of POP and abusive supervision has not been fully tested. Second, even though supervisor communication and skills have been accepted as moderators for stress-strain relationships, they have rarely been combined in the same model.

A key tension in the literature concerns how contextual and individual resources combine to affect workplace dynamics. Although supervisor communication reduces POP (Ferris et al., 2002; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and employee skills diminish the effects of POP (Luthans et al., 2007) and abusive supervision, few studies have examined how these factors interact. This study endeavors to address this gap by examining the relationship in dual moderated mediation (See Figure 1). Using the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, job satisfaction is a resource that buffers POP, which in turn mediates the relationship between job satisfaction and the perception of abusive supervision. We propose that supervisor communication is a contextual moderator that enhances the buffering effect of job satisfaction. Employee skills serve as an individual-level moderator, reducing the impact of POP on perceptions of abusive supervision.

Theoretical Grounding and Hypotheses

Developed by Hobfoll (1989), COR provides a framework for how individuals respond to stressors. It posits that individuals work to acquire, maintain, and protect resources, such as time, money, and skills. When the resources are threatened or taken, stress arises. In the workplace, stressors such as POP and abusive supervision deplete resources, leaving employees vulnerable to negative outcomes, including burnout and turnover (Hobfoll, 1989; Halbesleben et al., 2014).

COR divides resources into personal, social, and material domains. Skills, a personal resource, enhance the employee's ability to manage workplace issues and reduce the effects of stressors (Luthans et al., 2007). Supervisor communication, a social resource, supplies external reinforcement that buffers resource depletion. These two interact in a manner that shields the employee from the negative effects of both POP and abusive supervision.

Job Satisfaction and Perception of Organizational Politics

Considered a significant predictor of positive workplace outcomes such as reduced intent to turnover and employee well-being, high levels of job satisfaction are associated with employees who view their work in a positive light and are more likely to participate in organizational citizenship behavior (Judge et al., 2001; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) in alignment with COR, which states that persons with higher levels of resources have a shield from stressors.

The perception of politics is defined as the belief that requests for resource allocation are based on non-meritorious reasons, such as favoritism, selfishness, or undisclosed unfair motives (Ferris et al., 2002). As a significant stressor, it destroys trust and the sense of fairness (Rosen et al., 2009). The characteristics of a political environment include ambiguity, inconsistent policies, and resource scarcity. This creates an environment conducive to negative interpretations. As such, employees dissatisfied with their jobs are more likely to perceive workplace politics because job dissatisfaction erodes their ability to view the workplace constructively (Hochwarter et al., 2020). An example is a dissatisfied employee being overlooked for an award or promotion. They would be more likely to perceive the presence of politics instead of the possibility that the recipient was more qualified or deserving.

Because job satisfaction is a psychological resource and the perception of politics is a stressor, according to COR, higher job satisfaction provides a stronger buffer against stressors such as POP (Hobfoll, 1989). Furthermore, employees who are highly satisfied with their jobs are more likely to view workplace outcomes as the result of legitimate decision-making that lacks ulterior motives (Chang et al., 2009). Therefore:

H1: There is a negative relationship between job satisfaction and perception of politics.

Perception of Organizational Politics and the Perception of Abusive Supervision

Perceived abusive supervision occurs when an employee perceives their supervisor's actions as belittling, hostile, and excessively controlling (Tepper, 2007). As previously mentioned, POP is the employee's understanding that resource allocation is based on non-meritorious reasons, i.e., favoritism, self-interest, and unspoken agendas (Ferris et al., 2002). It is also known for undermining trust and contributing to resource depletion. In this state, according to Kacmar & Ferris (1993), the employee is likely to view the workplace through a suspicious lens, leading them to question every decision and perceive it as unfair, especially when the reasons are unclear or lack transparency. This suspicious lens is attributable to heightened sensitivity to the supervisor's actions. In this state, the employee is more likely to perceive the supervisor as abusive.

Harris et al. (2007) found that highly political environments can also take a toll on supervisors. The supervisor may also experience resource depletion, which can make them more critical, controlling, and inconsistent in their decision-making, all of which could lead the employee to perceive them as abusive. Therefore:

H2: There is a positive relationship between the perception of politics and abusive supervision.

Supervisor Communication as a moderator

Supervisor Communication is defined as the consistent, clear, and supportive sharing of information from the supervisor to the employee (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Supervisors who communicate have been found to foster an environment of reduced uncertainty; as a result, employees interpret supervisors' actions more favorably, which diminishes perceptions of politics and abusive supervision (Harris et al., 2007).

Rosen et al. (2009) explain that supervisor communication serves as a buffer against the negative relationship between job satisfaction and POP. As the supervisor communicates, the employee is better able to maintain a positive disposition and view organizational dynamics as aboveboard (Ferris et al., 2002; Chang et al., 2009). For example, a sense of fairness is fostered through open dialogue and timely feedback. This reduces the stress of POP, therefore:

H3: Supervisor communication moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and perceived politics, such that the negative relationship is stronger at higher levels.

Skills as a moderator

Luthans et al. (2007) define skill as the ability to perform job-related tasks and manage workplace demands. The work explains that skill is a critical resource that improves resilience and reduces the likelihood of perceiving abusive supervision in highly political areas. In highly political contexts, individuals with high levels of skill have the confidence to navigate challenging situations without resorting to negative attributions. This is not typically true for low-skilled employees, who are likely to perceive criticism as an attack, thereby increasing the likelihood of perceiving abusive supervision (Rosen et al., 2009). COR explains this by positing that skills increase resource reservoirs, thereby reducing employees' vulnerability to stressors associated with POP (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Therefore:

H4: Skills moderate the relationship between perception of politics and perception of abusive supervision such that the positive relationship is weaker at higher levels of skills.

Methods

Samples and Procedure

This dyadic study utilized professional networks and online platforms to recruit 171 participants. To qualify, participants had to be U.S. residents with a full-time job of at least 6 months' duration. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, provided with informed consent, and guaranteed anonymity. Only validated scales were utilized,

and to prevent common method bias, items for different constructs were randomized within the survey.

Measures

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction was measured with the 3-item scale from Cammann et al. (1979). A sample item was "In general, I like working at my job." Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.77.

Perception of Politics

Perceptions of organizational politics were measured with the 6-item scale from Hochwarter et al. (2003). A sample item included "There is a lot of self-serving behavior going on." Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert Scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.93.

Abusive Supervision

The 6-item abusive supervision scale from Harris, Harvey, and Kacmar (2011) was utilized in this study. A sample item is "My supervisor is rude to me". Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.90.

Supervisor Communication

Supervisor communication was measured using the 4-item scale developed by Harris and Kacmar (2005). A sample item was "My immediate supervisor makes his or her attitudes clear to the group". Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.80.

Employee Skills (measured by the Supervisor)

Employee skills were measured with a 4-item scale developed for this study. For this scale, supervisors were asked to consider the focal employee (whose name was provided) and then respond to 4 questions. A sample item was "This subordinate's communication skills are excellent", and the other three items substituted out "communication skills" with leadership skills, initiative, and interpersonal skills. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.82

Results

Process Macro Model 21 was used to analyze and test the hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 was supported ($b = -0.531$, $p < 0.001$), confirming a negative relationship between job satisfaction and perception of politics, see Table 2. Hypothesis 2 was supported ($b = 0.127$, $p = 0.002$); perception of politics is a stress that contributes to the perception of abusive behavior, see Table 2. Hypothesis 3 is supported (high 95% CI $-1.112, -.525$; $p = 0.000$; moderate 95% CI $-.732, -.331$, $p = 0.000$). The negative relationship is strongest when supervisor communication is at its highest, see Table 3. Lastly, hypothesis 4 is supported (low 95% CI: $.145, .343$, $p = 0.000$; moderate 95% CI: $.046, .208$, $p = 0.002$). At low and moderate levels, skills buffer the relationship between perceptions of politics and perceptions of abusive behavior; see Table 4.

Theoretical Implications

There are several theoretical implications from our study, a few of which will be highlighted below. One concerns the examination of the causal relationships among job satisfaction, POP, and abusive supervision. While previous studies have examined two of these variables, none to our knowledge have examined them in the causal sequence we employed in our study. The causal chain suggests that job satisfaction is related to POP, and that POP, in turn, is related to abusive supervision, which is noteworthy for theory and future research.

Another theoretical implication is that job satisfaction is associated with POP. Previous research has investigated POP as a predictor of job satisfaction (e.g., Snipes et al., 2024). Our study suggests that it may be more appropriate to view job satisfaction as a predictor of POP, as job satisfaction likely shapes how an individual perceives workplace politics. By focusing on the predictor of job satisfaction, our study provides managers with guidance on how to reduce POP (i.e., increase job satisfaction), thereby advancing theory in this area. A final theoretical implication of our study was the use of COR theory as a theoretical foundation. While COR has been utilized in previous studies on abusive supervision and POP (e.g., Tu & Chi, 2024), it has never been applied in a single study examining both constructs. Our investigation demonstrates that this theory can explain the phenomena underlying the relationships among all of our study variables. Additionally, COR theory offers opportunities for extensions and the introduction of other variables into our model (e.g., Valle et al., 2021).

Practical Implications

The results of this work contribute to an improved understanding of the workplace. First, all supervisors should communicate clearly. By actively reducing ambiguity, the supervisor reduces the employee's POP, which is beneficial when job satisfaction is low. Second, encourage employees to learn and sharpen their skills. In doing so, the employee will be less affected by the negativity associated with politically charged

workplaces and abusive supervision. Lastly, organizations should make all decisions as transparent as possible. When appropriate, provide explanations for hiring, firing, promotion, and demotion. Demonstrate to the employee that the playing field is level and that upward mobility is only gained through hard work and dedication.

To facilitate this, firms should utilize leadership programs that explain the detrimental effects of abusive supervision and politically charged environments. Then present modules on how to identify occurrences and how to remedy them. Investing in supervisors' soft skills could reduce resource depletion and improve the bottom line. The authors have provided recommended quick-start training timelines for HR practitioners. (Kirkpatrick, 1959; Lacerenza et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2010, 2021; Office of Personnel Management, 2016; Taylor et al., 2009). See Figure 2. These insights set the stage for evaluating the broader theoretical contributions of this work.

Discussion

While our findings provide important insights into workplace dynamics in the U.S., it is important to consider how these relationships might manifest differently across cultural boundaries. The mechanisms we identified—particularly the role of supervisor communication in buffering perceptions of politics and the protective function of employee skills—may operate differently in cultures with varying orientations toward power, communication, and workplace relationships. For instance, in high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 1980), such as many Asian and Latin American countries, employees may be less likely to perceive directive or controlling supervisor behaviors as abusive, instead viewing them as normative expressions of hierarchical authority. Conversely, supervisor communication patterns that we found beneficial for reducing political perceptions may be less effective in collectivist cultures, where indirect communication styles and group harmony take precedence over individual transparency and direct feedback.

Additionally, the role of individual skills as a buffer against political perceptions might be less pronounced in collectivist societies where group membership and relational networks often matter more than individual competencies in navigating organizational politics. Future research should replicate our dual moderated mediation model in diverse cultural contexts to examine whether these relationships hold universally or require cultural adaptation. Such cross-cultural investigations would not only test the boundary conditions of our findings but also enrich organizational theory by identifying culture-specific mechanisms through which job satisfaction, organizational politics, and leadership behaviors interact to shape employee experiences.

By studying the dynamic relationships between job satisfaction, POP, abusive supervision, and employee outcomes, we can validate and expand the existing

literature. First, the results support the hypothesis that there is an inverse relationship between employee satisfaction and employees' perceptions of politics. From the perspective of COR, job satisfaction serves as a resource that counteracts the employee's feeling of being in a political environment. Second, there is support for the connection between an employee's perception of abusive behavior and supervisory resource drain, which increases stress. This heightened stress leads supervisors to adopt hostile or controlling behaviors, which serve to protect their resources by engaging in actions that may be perceived as abusive supervision (Malik et al., 2021). Third, the mediation results indicate that POP acts as a key intervening mechanism between job satisfaction and abusive supervision. This expands the job satisfaction–leadership behavior literature by further explaining how satisfaction influences outcomes.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, relying on self-reported data raises concerns about common method bias, as both perceptions of politics and abusive supervision were measured from the same employee using a single survey instrument. Although this approach is theoretically appropriate for studying perceptions, and we randomized item order to reduce bias, shared method variance may still inflate correlations. Future research should incorporate multiple data sources, such as peer reports of abusive supervision or objective indicators of organizational politics, to enhance validity. Temporal separation of measures or varied response formats may also help mitigate this concern.

Second, all participants worked in the United States and were subject to specific customs and ideals. Since there are variations between countries in how workplace dynamics are perceived and experienced, this may limit the generalizability of the findings. For instance, cultures with higher power distance (Hofstede, 1980) may interpret supervisor behavior differently, and collectivist societies may place greater emphasis on organizational harmony than on individual perceptions of fairness. Future research should replicate this study in diverse cultural contexts, particularly in collectivist nations where workplace values and communication norms may differ substantially from those in the United States.

Third, the average score for abusive supervision in our sample was only 1.31 on a 5-point scale. While we recognize that abusive supervision is typically a low base-rate phenomenon in organizations and that participants may not always feel comfortable reporting such behaviors even in anonymous surveys, these low levels could be considered a limitation. However, it is important to note that previous research on abusive supervision (e.g., Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024) has also found similarly low levels, and our results, along with other studies, have demonstrated that abuse can have significant impacts even at these low levels. The restricted range may have

attenuated some relationships, potentially leading to conservative estimates of effect sizes. Future research might benefit from sampling from organizations with higher workplace stressors or from using experience sampling methods to capture variations in perceived abuse over time.

Fourth, although all participants worked in the United States, cultural variations could still arise due to factors such as industry, region, or socioeconomic status. Different industries may have varying norms regarding acceptable supervisor behavior and political climates. For example, highly competitive sales environments may differ substantially from academic or healthcare settings in terms of political perceptions. Regional differences in work culture within the United States may also influence how employees interpret supervisor communication and organizational politics.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of our study limits causal inferences. While our theoretical model proposes a specific causal sequence (job satisfaction → perception of politics → perception of abusive supervision), the data were collected at a single time point. This design cannot rule out alternative causal orderings or reciprocal relationships. For instance, it is possible that perceptions of abusive supervision could diminish job satisfaction over time, creating a downward spiral. Longitudinal or experimental designs would provide stronger evidence for the causal relationships proposed in our model and should be prioritized in future research.

Future Research Direction

Future research should first replicate this study in collectivist cultures, where different workplace values may influence these relationships. Additional mediators and moderators, such as interactional justice, supervisor trust, or psychological capital, could further elucidate how job satisfaction, POP, and abusive supervision interact, particularly given the roles of hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy in shaping outcomes. It would also be valuable to gather perceptions from multiple sources. Because POP and abusive supervision were measured only from the focal employee's perspective, future studies could incorporate peer reports, supervisor ratings, or relative comparisons within supervisor–subordinate groups to provide a broader view of these dynamics.

Another idea for future research is to employ other experimental designs, e.g., vignettes, to further elucidate causal effects by isolating factors. A unique yet interesting direction for future studies could be to examine the potential benefits of POP. Almost all research on POP has focused on the negative effects. However, recent research (Nyathi, 2024) has highlighted the potential benefits of perceived organizational politics; we encourage future researchers to explore these ideas further.

A final direction for future research would be to examine our relationships for non-linearity. Previous research (Harris & Kacmar, 2018; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013) and

organizational life in general have shown numerous situations in which the associations are not best represented as linear but rather as curvilinear or more complex relationships. Our moderated mediation model examined a more complex relationship, but there are others that we encourage future researchers to investigate.

Conclusion

This study employed dual moderated mediation to examine the relationship between job satisfaction and abusive supervision, with POP as the mediator and supervisor communication and employee skills as moderators. The results confirmed a negative relationship between job satisfaction and POP; however, the moderator (supervisor communication) was a statistically significant buffer that attenuated this relationship, indicating that as supervisors' communication ability increased, employees' POP decreased.

This work also confirms the connection between POP and abusive supervision. When employees perceive a politically charged environment, they are more likely to perceive themselves as victims of abusive supervision by the supervisor, who uses such supervision to protect their resources from depletion, a common pattern in highly political environments. Moderated by employee skills, the results suggest that, despite the environment, a highly skilled employee is either less able to perceive office issues or less concerned. Perhaps, due to their abilities and value to the firm, they are either oblivious to the issues or unfazed by them.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. ABUSE	1.31	0.56					
2. JOBSAT	4.17	0.72	-0.43***				
3. POP	2.86	0.99	0.41***	-0.43***			
4. SUPCOMM	3.89	0.81	-0.42***	0.38***	-0.31***		
5. SKILLS	3.95	0.78	-0.30***	0.28***	-0.19*	0.15	

Notes: N=171 * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Appendix B

Table 2: Mediation Analysis: Job Satisfaction → Perception of Organizational Politics → Abusive Supervision

Predictor	DV: Perception of Politics					DV: Abusive Supervision		
	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>p</i>
Job Satisfaction (IV)	-.531	.102	.000	-.731	-.331	—	—	—
POP (Mediator)	—	—	—	—	—	.127	.041	.002
R^2	.248	—	—	—	—	.316	—	—
F	18.309	—	—	—	—	19.153	—	—

Note: This table presents the mediation model testing whether perception of organizational politics (POP) **mediates** the relationship between job satisfaction and abusive supervision. The Independent Variable (**IV**) is job satisfaction—the predictor variable. The Mediator is POP—the mechanism explaining how job satisfaction affects outcomes. The Dependent Variable (**DV**) is abusive supervision—the outcome of interest. **LLCI** = Lower - Level Confidence Interval **ULCI** = Upper - Level Confidence Interval N = 171

Appendix C

Table 3: The Effect of Job Satisfaction on Political Perceptions at Low, Average, and High Levels of Supervisor Communication

Supervisor Communication	Effect of Job Satisfaction	se	t	p	95% CI
Low (1 SD below mean)	-0.244	0.142	-1.719	0.087	[-.525, .036]
Average (at mean)	-0.531	0.102	-5.228	0	[-.732, -.331]
High (1 SD above mean)	-0.819	0.148	-5.513	0	[-1.112, -.525]

Conditional Effects: How the Relationship Changes Based on Communication Quality

The "conditional effect" indicates the extent to which job satisfaction reduces political perceptions across different levels of supervisor communication. Higher values indicate stronger protective effects.

Note: N = 171. CI = Confidence Interval. SD = Standard Deviation. Results show that supervisor communication moderates the job satisfaction-POP relationship such that the protective effect of job satisfaction is strongest when communication is high ($b = -.819, p < .001$) and weakest (non-significant) when communication is low ($b = -.244, p = .087$).

Appendix D

Table 4: The Effect of Political Perceptions on Abusive Supervision at Low, Average, and High Levels of Employee Skills

Conditional Effects: How the Relationship Changes Based on Skill Level

Skills	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-0.785	0.244	0.05	4.877	0	0.145	0.343
0	0.127	0.041	3.107	0.002	0.046	0.208
0.785	0.011	0.059	0.177	0.859	-0.107	0.128

Appendix E

Figure 1: Model

