

WHEN ABUSIVE SUPERVISION BREAKS EXPECTATIONS: TURNOVER INTENTIONS AS A PATHWAY TO LOWER SUPERVISOR-RATED PERFORMANCE, ALTRUISM, AND PROMOTABILITY

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Abstract

Purpose — Drawing on expectation violations theory and social exchange theory, this paper examines whether perceptions of abusive supervision, when mediated by turnover intentions, lead to lower ratings of subordinate job-related performance, altruism, and promotability as rated by the supervisor.

Design/methodology — A dyadic survey design was employed with 171 employees. The data were analyzed with structural equation modeling.

Findings — The results revealed that abusive supervision, as rated by subordinates, is associated with lower supervisor-rated job performance, altruism, and subordinates' promotability.

Practical Implications — The authors illustrate the need to identify instances of abusive supervision, to provide stricter oversight of employee evaluations and promotions, and to embed non-abusive leadership traits, such as ethical and respectful behavior, into selection and promotion criteria.

Originality/value — The study is among the first to analyze the integrative role of expectation violation theory and social exchange theory to explain the potential downstream consequences of abusive supervision.

Keywords: abusive supervision, turnover intentions, supervisor-rated outcomes, expectancy violation theory, and withdrawal.

Introduction

I'm not in this world to live up to your expectations, and you're not in this world to live up to mine. – Bruce Lee

Discerning how the employee's perception of abusive supervision influences expectations and outcomes in the workplace, specifically turnover, is a key concern in management research, in part due to the \$23.8 billion lost annually by U.S. companies (Parent-Lamarche, 2022). Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as persistent non-

physical, hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors directed by supervisors toward their subordinates that result in harm (Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper, 2007; Zhang & Liao, 2015; Wu & Du, 2022). Abusive supervision has attracted scholarly attention, with numerous articles published in top-tier management journals and several meta-analyses (e.g., Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024; Mackey et al., 2017; Zhang & Liao, 2015).

Research on abusive supervision has focused on both direct and distal consequences (Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2023). Specifically, research has revealed strong associations between abusive supervision and weakened organizational commitment, as well as increased turnover intentions (Ali et al., 2022). A subordinate's perception that the manager engages in abusive supervision is associated with turnover intentions, defined as an employee's desire to separate their employment from an organization (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023).

Social exchange theory (SET; Blau, 1964), which provides a framework for understanding exchange and reciprocity in social relationships, has been extensively used to investigate abusive supervision (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). The tension in abusive supervision literature lies in the opportunity for additional, less-examined theories to offer a more comprehensive view of abusive supervision. For instance, research has not adequately focused on the mechanisms and outcomes of abusive supervision when expectations are unmet or violated. Expectation violation theory (EVT; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Saeed et al., 2024) posits that negative expectation violations elicit negative responses. Relying on EVT, we contend that the subordinate's perception of abusive supervision is the impetus for a domino effect: first, an increased desire for the subordinate to leave the organization, followed by negative perceptions of the subordinate's work performance, altruism, and promotability by the abusive supervisor. By examining abusive supervision through the dual lenses of EVT and SET, we can gain a deeper understanding of how unmet expectations within the framework of exchange and reciprocity norms contribute to the defining mechanisms and processes of abusive supervision.

Furthermore, exploring the synergistic role of EVT and SET in this study helps researchers better understand the potential downstream consequences of abusive supervision. First, this study breaks new ground by enabling researchers to explore the impact of violated expectations regarding perceived abusive behaviors and related leadership theories. Next, this study adopts a dual approach that enhances existing SET frameworks by incorporating EVT as a complementary theory for examining abusive supervisory behaviors. For instance, this study offers a more complete understanding of how a subordinate's perception of unmet expectations from their supervisor can indirectly affect the supervisor's perception of the subordinate's performance and promotability, which are shaped by those expectations. Lastly, this study provides both

practical and theoretical insights. This study offers lessons for scholars and organizations regarding the potential compounding and harmful effects of perceptions of abusive supervision and unmet expectations on a subordinate's ability to receive fair evaluations and advance within an organization.

Hypotheses Development

Social exchange theory (SET) posits that workplace interactions are characterized by a continuum of costs and benefits. Homans (1958) posits that social transactions can be elucidated using economic principles. He asserted that individuals seek to optimize their self-interest, implying that the benefits must outweigh the costs. Blau (1964; 2017) stated that SET is applicable outside of work. It clarifies that social transactions include both societal incentives and drawbacks. It asserts that the rewards of approval and esteem from neighbors, friends, and others in society are sufficient to drive behavior, hence highlighting the significance of power and social structure in relation to SET (Blau, 1964; 2017).

According to Gouldner (1960), with few exceptions, reciprocity is the expectation of cultures worldwide. It dictates that those who assist should not suffer harm, and those who return generosity should do so for beneficial purposes. Reciprocity, the central tenet of SET (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; O Rajâa & A Mekkaoui, 2025), violates an expectation when an employee perceives abusive supervision. This violation leads the employee to seek to rectify the imbalance in subsequent exchanges (Adams, 1965), which may include turnover.

The Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) posits that individuals form expectations about how they will be treated. Any deviation from or violation of the expected relationship may elicit a negative response (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Wayne et al., 2023). Violations can have long-lasting effects on an organization, including career paths, compensation, and the ability to earn a living. According to Burgoon and Hale (1988) and Fan (2023), although a violation can be positive, when it is negative, the results are far more salient, affecting the organization more than if the violation confirmed the employee's expectations.

Developed as a communication theory, EVT has value for the broader scientific community by demonstrating that negative violations in the life domain lead to deterioration in well-being and the enactment of withdrawal behaviors. In terms of the organization, Zhao et al. (2007) demonstrated that when the leader failed to support the employee, provide resources, or sideline the employee's career, the employee responded with withdrawal behavior, as evidenced by reduced overall effort and engagement. Zacher and Rudolph (2021) expanded on the impact of EVT by explaining how violations influence employees' future-oriented identity. When violations occur, they not only affect current circumstances but also lead employees to hold negative

views of their prospects within the organization. Considered as a constraint on prospects, the employees reevaluate their view of the organization and begin to reduce their efforts. The supervisor considers this reduction a violation, as the employee is expected to be fully engaged with the organization and its well-being. In response to this violation, the supervisor lowers his/her evaluation of the employee's altruism, promotability, and overall job performance.

Defined as the persistent mistreatment of employees by those in positions of authority, abusive supervision leads to a heightened desire among employees to turnover (Tepper, 2000; Mackey et al., 2017; Moin, 2022). This is due to employees' expectations of fair treatment and a reasonable opportunity for advancement within the organization. As abusive supervision violates these expectations, the employee begins to reevaluate his/her future with the organization. This evaluation often leads employees to withdraw or distance themselves because they no longer believe that the organization serves their future selves (Yu et al., 2016). Therefore,

H1. There is a positive relationship between abusive supervision and intent to turnover.

Turnover intentions reflect a withdrawal mindset that often leads to noticeable changes in workplace attitudes and motivation, including reduced extra-role activities and diminished task focus. As these become visible, supervisors may revise their judgments of an employee's performance and citizenship from favorable to a concern that the employee is no longer a substantial long-term investment, lowering ratings of altruism, job performance, and promotability.

Extra-role activities, such as altruism, are curtailed when employees intend to leave the firm (Podsakoff et al., 2009; Maalim et al., 2023). One way the withdrawal is expressed is through the employee's purposeful reduction in altruism (Podsakoff et al., 2009; Redelinguys, 2019; Yu et al., 2016). As this is a violation of the expectations of the supervisor, we hypothesize that:

H2a. Turnover intentions are negatively associated with subordinate altruism as rated by supervisors

Several studies have shown that turnover intentions are often associated with a future decline in supervisor-rated performance. Employees who intend to quit often withdraw, reducing the effort they expend on task completion (Sheridan, 1985; Arshadi & Damiri, 2013; Swider & Zimmerman, 2014; Kaur et al., 2024; Liu & Raghuram, 2022). Due to their withdrawal, the employees no longer view the organization as a place of growth and opportunity; therefore, there is no reason to continue investing in their future at the firm. For this reason, they make noticeable reductions in effort. Such

conduct violates the supervisor's expectation that the position be fulfilled at the highest possible level. Therefore:

H2b. Turnover intentions are negatively associated with subordinate job performance as rated by supervisors

Supervisors promote employees whom they think will be long-term assets to the firm. Withdrawal behavior threatens this perception, as the employee has reduced or ceased all altruistic behavior and has lowered their performance. Although the supervisor may have held a positive view of the employee previously, these violations will require the supervisor to reevaluate the employee's position within the organization. As supervisors rarely promote employees who appear to be exhibiting the signs of departure, we theorize that:

H2c. Turnover intentions are negatively associated with supervisors' ratings of subordinates' promotability.

Sample and Procedure

The data for this study were collected in a dyadic method from full-time employees of a semi-autonomous branch of a state government agency in the United States. This branch was responsible for handling family-related health issues (e.g., distribution of food stamps). To start data collection, the agency director sent an invitation to employees to participate in the survey. Each subordinate survey included the name of their immediate supervisor for matching purposes. Supervisors were also contacted and asked to complete ratings for each of their direct reports. Eliminating surveys with missing data or those that could not be matched produced a sample of 171 (80% response rate).

Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all survey items were responded to on a 5-point Likert scale, with anchors of strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). As part of our research design, subordinates provided ratings of the independent variable (abusive supervision) and the mediator (turnover intentions), and supervisors provided ratings of the three outcome variables.

Subordinate Rated Measures

Abusive supervision. Abusive supervision was measured using the 6-item scale developed by Harris, Harvey, and Kacmar (2011). A sample item is "My supervisor is rude to me". The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was .934.

Turnover intentions. Turnover intentions were measured using the 3-item scale developed by Seashore et al. (1982). A sample item is: "It is likely that I will actively look for a new job in the next year." The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .942.

Supervisor Rated Measures

Altruism. Supervisors responded to the Podsakoff et al. (1990) 3-item altruism scale. A sample item is: "This subordinate helps others who have heavy workloads." The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .876.

Job performance. Subordinates' job performance was measured using supervisors' responses to Wayne and Liden's (1995) four-item Scale ($\alpha = .906$). A sample item included "This subordinate has been effectively fulfilling his/her roles and responsibilities."

Promotability. The promotability of subordinates was rated by the supervisor using the 4-item scale from Harris, Law-Penrose, and Ross (2022). A sample item is: "If I had to select a successor for my position, it would be this subordinate." The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .811.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between study variables are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Var	M	SD	R ²	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intent to Turnover	2.10	1.19	.292	—				
2. Abusive Supervision	1.61	0.87	—	.602**	—			
3. Altruism	4.23	0.68	.114	-.387**	-.476**	—		
4. Job Performance	4.07	0.76	.114	-.294**	-.270**	.226**	—	
5. Promotability	3.53	0.90	.053	-.285**	-.290**	.409**	.467**	—

The correlations in our study were moderate, as expected, with only one correlation above .48, and that was the correlation between abusive supervision and intent to turnover. One observation to note in Table 1 is the low means for turnover intentions (mean = 2.10) and abusive supervision (mean = 1.61). Although these means are low, they are in line with research in these areas. Notably, previous research on abusive supervision (e.g., Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2011; Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2004) has found the construct to have a low base rate but to be highly impactful even at low levels.

Table 2: Results

Path	b	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Abusive Supervision → Intention to Turnover	0.541	0.075	7.258	.000	0.382	0.672
Intention to Turnover → Job Performance	-0.337	0.076	4.413	.000	-0.477	-0.180
Abusive Supervision → Job Performance (c')	-0.182	0.053	3.442	.001	-0.296	-0.089
Intention to Turnover → Altruism	-0.338	0.079	4.284	.000	-0.480	-0.175
Abusive Supervision → Altruism (c')	-0.183	0.055	3.306	.001	-0.299	-0.085
Intention to Turnover → Promotability	-0.231	0.071	3.231	.001	-0.363	-0.085
Abusive Supervision → Promotability (c')	-0.125	0.044	2.845	.004	-0.219	-0.046

Note: DV = Dependent Variable; IV = Independent Variable; M = Mediator. All paths significant at $p < .01$. $N = 171$.

Table 2 provides the results of our analysis. H1 states that there is a positive relationship between the perception of abusive supervision and the employee's intent to turnover ($b = 0.541$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .292$), which is supported. H2a states that there is a negative relationship between employees' intent to turnover and supervisor-rated employee altruism; this hypothesis was supported ($b = -.338$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .114$), as shown in Table 2. H2b states that there is a negative relationship between employee-rated intent to turnover and supervisor-rated employee job performance ($b = -.337$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .114$), which is supported in Table 2. Last, H2c states that there is a negative relationship between employee-rated promotability and intent to turnover. The relationship between supervisor-rated employee promotability and turnover intent is negative ($b = -.231$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .053$), indicating that this finding is supported, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 3: Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	Predictor → Outcome	b	p	R ² (model)	Supported?
H1	Abusive supervision → Turnover intentions	0.541	< .001	.292	Yes
H2a	Turnover intentions → Supervisor-rated altruism	−0.338	< .001	.114	Yes
H2b	Turnover intentions → Supervisor-rated job performance	−0.337	< .001	.114	Yes
H2c	Turnover intentions → Supervisor-rated promotability	−0.231	< .001	.053	Yes

Table 3 provides a summary of our hypotheses, the results for each, and statements of support for each. As shown, H1, H2a, H2b, and H2c were all supported.

Discussion

This study integrates SET and EVT to understand abusive supervision and its effects on work outcomes. The results demonstrate that abusive supervision, as a violation of relational expectations, accounts for a substantial amount of the variance in intent to turnover ($R^2 = .292$). When abused, the employee may reciprocate by either developing or strengthening their intention to leave the organization. The supervisor degrades the employee's work outcomes (promotability, altruism, and job performance) when the employee's intent to leave is high. Further, these outcomes also had a direct negative relationship with abusive supervision, demonstrating that even without the mediator (turnover intentions), it is associated with lower supervisor evaluations. This work suggests that abusive supervision creates a breakdown of expectations, which is reciprocated through withdrawal behaviors.

Theoretical Implications

This study has implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, the current study supplemented the SET framework by integrating EVT. EVT represents a novel approach to understanding the effects of abusive supervision. Previous research on abusive supervision has drawn on SET, conservation of resources theory, affective events theory, justice theories, and social learning theory. However, this study utilizes EVT to posit how violated expectations, in the form of abusive supervision, impact subordinates. Our findings revealed that abusive supervision is positively associated with turnover intentions, which in turn are negatively associated with desired job outcomes. The use of EVT to shed light on abusive supervision provides a new lens for viewing these behaviors and can be utilized to examine several relationships going forward.

Another strength of our study, with implications for theory in this domain, lies in our research design and choice of outcome variables. This study measured the abusive supervision and turnover intentions from the subordinate's perspective, and then measured altruism, job performance, and promotability from the supervisors' perspective. This research design minimizes common-source bias and investigates in-role outcomes (job performance), extra-role outcomes (altruism), and overall perceptions of promotability. This wide range of outcomes, which were only correlated between 0.23-0.47, shed light on multiple different aspects of how the supervisor views a subordinate. Finally, from a theoretical perspective, no previous research has examined the impact of abusive supervision on supervisor reports of subordinate promotability. Including promotability as an outcome variable expands the nomological network related to abuse and shows that as abusive supervision is higher, subordinates respond with higher turnover intentions. Supervisors likely notice these turnover

intentions and accompanying behaviors, and the resulting supervisor assessments of subordinate promotability are affected.

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, turnover is a substantial cost for organizations, including lost productivity, decreased morale, and the loss of hard-won talent. Because this study demonstrates that abusive supervision, conceptualized as a violation of relational expectations, explains 29.2% of the variance in employees' turnover intentions ($R^2 = .292$), it is in firms' best interests to understand how employees perceive their supervisors. One practical step is to regularly monitor employees' views of their supervisors' leadership style alongside indicators such as affective commitment, turnover intentions, and self-reported or objective productivity. The analysis will assist organizations in identifying units in which abusive patterns may emerge and intervene before heightened withdrawal intentions translate into actual exits and the associated financial and human costs.

To mitigate the effects of abusive supervision, employee evaluation and promotion processes require stricter oversight. Specifically, a second step should be added to the employee evaluation process prior to implementing any corrective action. Furthermore, given that abusive supervisors tend to assign lower performance ratings, promotion decisions could incorporate a third-party assessment. This could mean asking employees what they think about a coworker's ability to receive a promotion or using an objective, computerized program to measure productivity and overall value. However, there are limitations to third-party assessment. First, the supervisor must contact only employees who are close enough to know the subject but far enough away to maintain objectivity. Neither their friend nor enemy would give a fair assessment. Second, the supervisor must consider the possibility of jealousy. What if the person who is being asked to assess the subject wants the position? This would lower the likelihood of objectivity. Last, the supervisor would have to take great care to choose only a person who could keep the search confidential. Informing those who were not selected could reduce morale.

Finally, organizations have strong incentives to demand non-abusive leadership because abusive supervision is correlated with costly withdrawal intentions and less favorable evaluative outcomes. This can be pursued by emphasizing ethical and respectful leadership in selection and promotion criteria, rather than assuming that high individual performance automatically signals readiness to manage others. Leadership training, ongoing coaching, and formal mentorship can reinforce expectations of fair and respectful treatment and equip supervisors with constructive influence tactics. By prioritizing the promotion of individuals who both perform well and demonstrate a propensity for ethical, non-abusive leadership, firms can reduce the likelihood that

employees experience the relational breakdowns and withdrawal responses documented in this study.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

First, researchers should develop models that specifically test the rare integration of SET and EVT in abusive supervision literature. This dual-sided violation framing, in which the perception of abusive supervision violates the employee's expectations and subsequently leads to withdrawal, also violates the supervisor's expectations; this concept could be extended to include additional mediators, such as identity threat, voice, and psychological capital, which are linked to outcomes like counterproductive work behavior, organizational justice, and supervisor trust.

Second, consider a longitudinal study examining whether the effects of the abuse on the employee are confined to the current position. The study should encompass the various phases that accompany employees throughout their career transitions. It should focus on the lingering effects and whether they persist in new situations. If the perception of abuse at the previous position lingers, what determines the duration (personality, age, religious background, or marital status)? Does this make the employee more challenging to manage? Does the employee perceive injustice as more catastrophic than an employee who was not abused?

Finally, all the relationships we examined in this study were linear, direct relationships. Although this is important for understanding organizational phenomena and provides the most accurate depiction of our relationships, organizational life is complex. Thus, we encourage future research efforts to examine non-linear depictions of our relationships, as well as include other variables (e.g., organizational tenure, Machiavellianism, career satisfaction, supervisor-subordinate relationship tenure, relative abusive supervision) that might moderate some of the relationships we examined (Mitchell, Sullivan, Harris, & Cole, 2025). It is also worth noting that the sample was drawn from the U.S. and may limit generalizability; therefore, future studies should explicitly incorporate other regions.

Conclusion

In sum, this study integrates EVT and SET to demonstrate how perceptions of abusive supervision, when mediated by turnover intentions, can negatively influence a supervisor's perceptions of a subordinate's job performance, altruism, and promotability. These findings highlight important downstream consequences of abusive supervision that organizations should be mindful of. These results illustrate the practical importance of understanding how employee perceptions shape supervisory judgments and highlight the need for interventions to mitigate these effects. As one of the first studies to jointly apply EVT and SET in this context, the research provides an excellent

starting point for future work to unpack further the mechanisms and outcomes associated with abusive supervision.

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