The Leadership Quarterly xxx (2015) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

The bad boss takes it all: How abusive supervision and leader–member exchange interact to influence employee silence

Angela J. Xu *, Raymond Loi [1], Long W. Lam [2]

Department of Management and Marketing, University of Macau, Avenida da Universidade, Taipa, Macau, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 28 January 2014
Received in revised form 24 January 2015
Accepted 9 March 2015
Available online xxxx

Handling Editor: Kevin Lowe

Keywords:
Abusive supervision
Leader–member exchange (LMX)
Emotional exhaustion
Silence
Resources

ABSTRACT

Abusive supervision is a dysfunctional leadership behavior that adversely affects its targets and the organization as a whole. Drawing on conservation of resources (COR) theory, the present research expands our knowledge on its destructive impact. Specifically, we propose a moderated mediation model wherein abusive supervision predicts subordinate's silence behavior through emotional exhaustion, with leader–member exchange (LMX) acting as the contextual condition. Two-wave data collected from 152 employees in the service industry in Macau supported our hypothesized model. We found that abused subordinates resort to remain silent in the workplace due to their feelings of emotional exhaustion. Further, the presence of high LMX makes the adverse impact of abusive supervision even worse. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed. We also offer several promising directions for future research.

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Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a considerable academic and public interest in abusive supervision given its increasing occurrence in the workplace (Tepper, 2007; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014). Introduced by Tepper (2000, p. 178) as a dark-side leadership behavior, abusive supervision captures "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact". Such hostile behaviors include angry tantrums, public criticisms, and inappropriately assigned blame. Abusive supervision has incurred huge hidden costs to the organization in terms of increased counterproductive work behaviors and decreased organizational citizenship behaviors (see Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013 for a review). Current literature has also conceptualized such form of supervision as a salient workplace stressor that has detrimental psychological impacts on abused employees (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Chi & Liang, 2013; Whitman et al., 2014).

From the perspective of conservation of resources (COR) theory, abused subordinates rarely report or retaliate against their higher-status supervisors because they are dependent on their supervisors for desirable resources such as continued employment and advancement opportunities (Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007; Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). To preserve

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +853 6557 0024.
E-mail addresses: yb27005@umac.mo (A.J. Xu), rloi@umac.mo (R. Loi), ricolam@umac.mo (L.W. Lam).
[1] Tel.: +853 8822 8890.
[2] Tel.: +853 8822 8883.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.03.002
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their limited resources and alleviate their psychological discomfort, they tend to adopt avoidant or passive coping strategy by distancing themselves from the sources of stress (Tepper et al., 2007). Research suggests that victims of abuse may engage in regulative tactics (i.e., attempts to maintain relationships by avoiding contact; Tepper et al., 2007) and feedback avoidance behaviors (i.e., attempts to intentionally evade feedback from the supervisor; Whitman et al., 2014). Thus, employee silence, referring to employees' intentional withholding of critical or seemingly important information, ideas, questions, concerns or opinions about issues relating to their jobs and the organizations in which they work (e.g., Brinsfield, Edwards, & Greenberg, 2009; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003), should be another employees' natural and logical response to supervisors' abuse. Unfortunately, existing knowledge on the relationship between abusive supervision and employee silence remains limited (Morrison, 2014). The present study aims to extend this line of research by proposing emotional exhaustion, "a chronic state of emotional and physical depletion" (Harvey et al., 2007, p. 266), as a core mediating mechanism. In particular, we propose employee silence as a safe response for subordinates to conserve the remaining resources caused by emotional exhaustion rooted from abusive supervision.

Besides leaders' behavior, the relationship quality between a leader and a follower also exerts pivotal impact on the follower's reactions (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). While abusive supervision represents specific harmful supervisory behavior that occurs at any time during daily interactions (Tepper & Henle, 2011), leader–member exchange (LMX) refers to the overall quality of a supervisor–subordinate relationship that develops over time (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). To broaden our understanding of how bad leadership behavior and leader–follower relationship quality may interactively influence subordinates' well-being and behavior, we further predict in this research that LMX moderates the above proposed relationships. Building on COR theory, we postulate that abusive supervision in a high-quality LMX relationship can be more threatening to subordinates' valued resources, which culminates in heightened emotional exhaustion and silence behavior. Fig. 1 presents our hypothesized model.

The present research contributes to the current literature in several ways. First of all, it broadens our existing knowledge on the deleterious impacts of abusive supervision. By linking supervisors' abuse to employee silence, we answer the call of Tepper et al. (2007) for more research on subordinates' passive responses other than the well-established aggressive ones in order to capture the full picture of what goes on under abusive supervision. Besides taking aggressive reactions which may aggravate or ultimately terminate their relationships with supervisors (Tepper et al., 2007), there are still a number of subordinates adopting passive coping strategy to supervisory abuse (Chi & Liang, 2013; Wu & Hu, 2013). It is theoretically and practically important to understand how these employees work with their abusive supervisors on a daily basis (Tepper et al., 2007; Whitman et al., 2014). In this regard, silence is a particularly important passive reaction due to its widespread detrimental impact on organizations at all levels (Morrison, 2014). A bundle of well-known organizational tragedies, such as the collapse of Enron and Worldcom, have occurred due to employee silence. Moreover, without critical and timely information from lower-level employees, organizations fail to correct potentially serious problems and obtain instant ideas for continuous improvement (Milliken & Morrison, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008).

Second, by examining the moderating role of LMX, this study further extends this research stream by providing a relational context within which abuse exerts harmful influence. Most leadership research today has exclusively focused on either leadership behavior (i.e., leader-based domain) or supervisor–subordinate dyadic relationship (i.e., relationship-based domain; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012). The present study thus makes important contributions to the extant leadership literature by simultaneously taking abusive supervisory behavior and LMX into account and examining their interactive impact on subordinates from a resource conservation perspective.

Last but not least, despite the well-acknowledged harmful impact of silence, research on its antecedents is surprisingly scant (see Morrison, 2014 for a review). The present study also makes an important addition to this inadequacy by investigating the leadership influence (i.e., abusive supervision and LMX) as well as the underlying process of emotional exhaustion. From a practical aspect, our findings further call organizations' attention to the crippling impact of abusive supervision and provide important implications for organizations to prevent silence. It further draws supervisors' awareness regarding the impact of their leadership practice on subordinates' well-being and silence decisions.

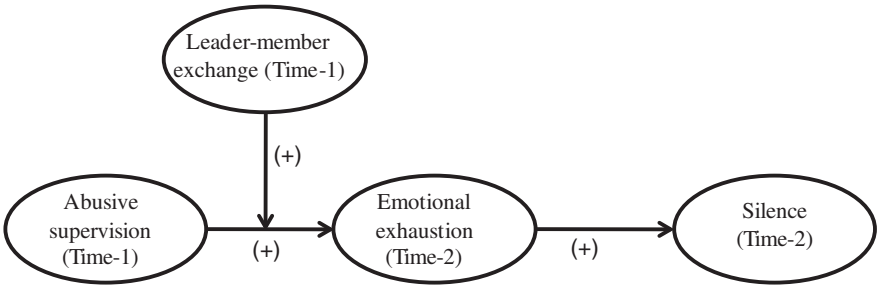

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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Theory and hypotheses development

Conservation of resources (COR) theory

COR theory presents a comprehensive process of how stress occurs and how individuals respond to stress. The central tenet resides in this theory is that "individuals strive to retain, protect, and build resources" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516) such as social support, personal characteristics, time, and energy. Resources are valued because they not only have the instrumental value of offering people means to fulfill important and meaningful goals, but also carry the symbolic value of identifying individuals as who they are. Human beings fundamentally seek to create a situation with resource surpluses and avoid situations that might cause their loss of valued resources since the latter would cause psychological discomfort or stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001).

When not threatened by stressors, individuals are motivated to acquire, maintain and invest the necessary resources to meet their work demands, and accumulate excess resources for potential future strain (Hobfoll, 2001). However, when confronted with chronic stressors, individuals strive to conserve their remaining resources and protect themselves from potential further resource loss and depletion (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011). To achieve this, they attempt to distance themselves from the stressors by investing some resources to engage in passive and defensive behaviors (e.g., Cole, Bernerth, Walter, & Holt, 2010; Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993).

Abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion

Displayed by ridiculing, undermining, and yelling at subordinates, abusive supervision stands as a salient workplace stressor that threatens subordinates' actual or potential loss of valued resources in terms of employment security and career opportunities (e.g., Aryee et al., 2008; Whitman et al., 2014). It also taxes subordinates' personal resources such as self-efficacy and self-esteem (Harvey et al., 2007). More than that, abused subordinates have to spend much more time and energy to struggle and survive when compared with their non-abused counterparts due to uncertainty (Whitman et al., 2014). As a result, emotional exhaustion occurs as abused subordinates find themselves vulnerable and lacking adequate emotional, personal, or social resources to cope with their abusive supervisors (e.g., Hobfoll, 1989; Lee & Ashforth, 1993).

As a core syndrome of burnout, emotional exhaustion captures individuals' "feelings of being overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources" (Maslach & Leiter, 2008, p. 498). Relative to the other two dimensions of burnout (i.e., depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment), emotional exhaustion is an extreme form of fatigue that accounts for individuals' intense physical, affective, and cognitive strain engendered by workplace stressors (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003; Wright & Hobfoll, 2004) such as abusive supervision. It is also a reliable indicator of individuals' work life quality (Gaines & Jermier, 1983) and a core predictor of many important organizational outcomes such as job performance and turnover intention (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Wright and Hobfoll (2004) also noted actual or potential resource depletion as the central cause of emotional exhaustion. Thus, we focus on emotional exhaustion as a strain symptom resulting from the exposure to abusive supervision, and propose:

Hypothesis 1. Abusive supervision is positively related to subordinate's emotional exhaustion.

Abusive supervision and silence

According to COR theory, resource loss is much more salient than resource gain (Hobfoll, 2011). Depleted individuals are highly motivated to protect their limited resources and take care not to deplete the remaining resources further or too deeply (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Emotionally exhausted individuals thus "often resort to conserving their remaining resources by lowering their morale, reducing their commitment to the organization and decreasing their performance efforts" (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004, p. 391). Tepper et al. (2007) also suggested that subordinates choose to adopt avoidant or passive behavior to alleviate the psychological distress associated with the threatening stressors. In this study, we suggest silence to be a passive but yet crucial response for abused subordinates to conserve the remaining resource and relieve the psychological discomfort of emotional exhaustion. Silence captures employees' intentional withholding of potential important ideas or concerns about work-related issues. It is not about non-communication (i.e., having nothing to say); rather, it is a deliberate employees' decision of not reporting problems or withholding suggestions (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). For this reason, researchers consider silence as a passive counterproductive work behavior that is potentially harmful to organizations (Bolton, Harvey, Grawitch, & Barber, 2012).

From the perspective of COR, speaking up per se is usually personally costly and risky (Bolino & Turnley, 2005). It also requires extra effort, time, and energy because employees have to polish their ideas, wait for a right time and then articulate in an appropriate manner (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Ng & Feldman, 2012). Those who speak up are at the risk of being marked as complainers or trouble-markers, and they may, as a result, lose desirable personal resources or professional opportunities (Detert & Treviño, 2010; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). In particular, expressing concerns regarding critical work issues may challenge the status quo or the authority, which would cost more available resources and also lead to future resource depletion (Ng & Feldman, 2012). In contrast, remaining silent within one's workplace is a natural and safe way to preserve one's remaining resources when feeling emotionally exhausted. It is less time and resource consuming than speaking up (Morrison, 2011). Furthermore, withholding important and critical information could also prevent possible resource loss that might be caused by questioning current work

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situations. In particular, emotionally exhausted subordinates would hold back concerns over their abusive supervisors in fear of more potential resource loss (e.g., promotion and pay raises) accompanied by further abusive encounters (Tepper et al., 2007).

Supervisory abuse threatens and depletes employees' personal and social resources. Exhausted subordinates are thus motivated to minimize the adverse effects of the source of stress (i.e., abusive supervision). They would not risk their remaining resources to change the status quo and help improve the current work situation (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Instead, they would rather adopt silence to isolate themselves from the work, with an attempt to protect their limited valuable resources and focus their efforts to prevent further resource loss at the expense of the organization (Bolton et al., 2012; Greenberg & Edwards, 2009). Following this line of argument, we propose silence as a passive coping strategy emotionally exhausted subordinates would adopt when confronted with sustained supervisory abuse.

Hypothesis 2. Subordinate's emotional exhaustion mediates the positive relationship between abusive supervision and silence.

The moderating role of LMX

Like any other relationships such as parent–child, husband–wife, and mentor–mentee, there are also bad times in a generally good supervisor–subordinate relationship (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Hobman, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2009). LMX is defined as "the emotional and resource-based exchanges in the supervisor–subordinates dyad" (Loi, Mao, & Ngo, 2009, p. 404). While abusive supervision denotes specific supervisor behavior that could happen at any time during the interaction between a supervisor and a subordinate (Tepper & Henle, 2011), LMX sets the tone for an overall supervisor–subordinate relationship that develops over time (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Abusive supervision and LMX thus can coexist and are different perspectives employees take into consideration to assess a supervisor's leadership practice (Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008). As noted by Tepper et al. (2007), low LMX does not necessarily involve abuse. Similarly, subordinates who perceive high LMX are not necessarily excluded from supervisory abuse. High-LMX subordinates may recall abusive occasions such as being ridiculed or publicly criticized (Lian et al., 2012), similar to the research finding on romantic relationships showing some wives simultaneously reported high levels of relationship quality and high levels of negative feelings towards their husbands (Fincham & Linfield, 1997). Therefore, consistent with previous studies (Burris et al., 2008; Lian et al., 2012), we treat abusive supervision and LMX as two independent constructs.

Research on "mixed messages" (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Hobman et al., 2009; Major, Zubek, Cooper, Cozzarelli, & Richards, 1997) has revealed that negative treatment plays a powerful role in individuals' psychological distress because of its rare, unexpected, and surprising nature. In particular, the power of the negative impact is magnified in a close and supportive relationship. Building on these findings, we argue that negative stimulus like supervisory abuse is also more threatening to those subordinates who have a good relationship with the supervisor. Employees with high-quality LMX believe their supervisors recognize their potential, understand their problems and needs, and are ready to provide resources when they need (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High LMX also signifies high levels of supervisory emotional and instrumental support, including encouragement, recognition, and challenging work opportunities (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Subordinates in a high-quality LMX tend to believe that their supervisors are important sources of social support in the workplace (Halbesleben, 2006). Hence, they will feel particularly deprived when becoming the target of abuse because it is beyond normal expectation, and connotes the actual or potential loss of such vital and meaningful resources. In short, high-LMX subordinates are more sensitive to the signal conveyed by supervisory abuse. They go through a much harder time when receiving supervisory abuse since they believe that their supervisors should trust and respect them and give them a hand when needed.

In addition, inconsistent informational cues about supervisory behavior and LMX quality create an uncontrollable and unpredictable work context (Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Piccolo, 2012) where subordinates' emotional exhaustion will more likely occur (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). In the organization, subordinates usually rely on their supervisors for their future development and career (Loi, Chan, & Lam, 2014). As pointed out by Nahum-Shani, Henderson, Lim, and Vinokur (2014), a supervisor could provide advice and assistance to stimulate employee performance which is known as supportive behaviors in high LMX while at the same time displaying hostility when employees perform poorly. When high-LMX subordinates perceive both abuse and support coming from the same source (i.e., the supervisor), they tend to experience the psychological uneasiness of cognitive dissonance (Beehr, Farmer, Glazer, Gudanowski, & Nair, 2003). They will feel trapped in an ambivalent and conflicting state (Elliot & Devine, 1994), and need more resources to solve such dissonance. High-LMX subordinates are thus confused about how the supervisor really feels. They are uncertain about how to utilize the support they may obtain from their supervisors, and are even not sure how to face and respond to their supervisors in day-to-day communication (Major et al., 1997). Such situation drains more resources from them to make sense of their supervisors (Greenbaum et al., 2012). Consistent with these arguments, Duffy et al. (2002) and Hobman et al. (2009) found that perceived supervisor support makes supervisor undermining more detrimental to subordinate's psychological well-being.

On the contrary, a low-quality LMX relationship is mainly based on employment contract instead of various symbolic resource exchanges as in a high-quality LMX relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Low-LMX subordinates are treated as "out-group" members. They do not expect that their supervisors will recognize their contributions, and offer them essential resources when needed. The two parties in a low-quality LMX thus do not have high levels of trust, respect, or obligation for each other as those in a high-quality LMX. When abuse occurs among low-LMX subordinates, they generally feel "nothing to lose" and appraise abuse as less threatening to their personal and other valued resources (Lian et al., 2012). In other words, they are less sensitive to the

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negative signal delivered by the abuse. Furthermore, abused subordinates in the context of low LMX are less likely to undergo the cognitive dissonance and uncertain situation when compared with those abused ones in the context of high LMX. Therefore, we expect:

Hypothesis 3. LMX moderates the positive relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate's emotional exhaustion. Such relationship is more pronounced when LMX is high rather than low.

Thus far, we have explained how abusive supervision leads to subordinates' silence via emotional exhaustion, and propose the moderating role of LMX on the abusive supervision–emotional exhaustion relation. Taking these together, we further propose the moderated mediation model of these relationships. In the context of a high-quality LMX relationship, subordinates' perceptions of supervisory abuse are more likely to be transformed into their silence behavior due to increased levels of emotional exhaustion. However, the association between abusive supervision and subordinate silence behavior via emotional exhaustion is less salient in a typically unsupportive relationship (indicated by low-quality LMX). Accordingly, we put forward:

Hypothesis 4. LMX moderates the positive relationship between abusive supervision and silence via subordinate's emotional exhaustion. Such relationship is more pronounced when LMX is high rather than low.

Methods

Sample and procedure

We conducted a two-phase questionnaire survey by collecting responses from employees working in the service industry in Macau, People's Republic of China. In July 2013 (Time-1), we distributed questionnaires to 220 full-time employees through a training course offered by a local university. On the cover page of the questionnaire, we explained the voluntary nature of this survey and assured anonymity and confidentiality to the participants. We also provided the contact information of the third author in case respondents have any questions or inquiries. Respondents were asked to assess their perceptions of abusive supervision and LMX, using their current immediate supervisors as referees. We received 176 completed questionnaires, representing the response rate of 80.0% in Time-1. Two weeks later (Time-2), we conducted the second-phase survey, following the same procedures as in Time-1. Respondents provided their ratings on emotional exhaustion and silence behavior. Every questionnaire was marked with a unique code which was recorded in a master file such that the responses received from the two phases can be matched. Finally, we received 152 completed and usable questionnaires, representing an overall response rate of 69.1%.

Within the sample, 45.4% were male and 58.5% aged from 28 to 37. Sixty-eight percent worked for their companies for more than 3 years and 27.2% had a university degree or above.

Measures

All measures used in this survey were adopted from the established scales written in English. Considering that all of our participants were Chinese, we went through appropriate back translation procedures (Brislin, 1970) to develop the Chinese version for the measures.

Abusive supervision

We assessed abusive supervision by using the five-item scale of Mitchell and Ambrose (2007). Sample items are “my supervisor ridicules me” and “my supervisor tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid”. Respondents rated the extent to which they perceive their supervisors engage in abusive behaviors based on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 6 (“strongly agree”). The alpha coefficient was .93.

Leader–member exchange

The seven-item scale used by Graen and Scandura (1987) was adopted. Sample items read “my supervisor understands my job's problems and needs” and “my supervisor recognizes my potential”. Respondents rated this measure based on the 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 6 (“strongly agree”). Cronbach's alpha was .88.

Emotional exhaustion

We used the nine-item scale from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) to measure emotional exhaustion. Sample items include “I feel used up at the end of the workday”, and “I feel like I'm at the end of my rope”. Respondents rated the frequency that they have such feelings based on a 7-point scale (1 = “never” to 7 = “once a day”). The scale's reliability was .87.

Silence

Five items adapted from Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) were used to measure the extent to which employees withhold ideas, concerns, questions, or information about critical work issues. Sample items are “you chose to remain silent when you had concerns about your work” and “although you had ideas for improving work, you did not speak up”. Items were rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (“never”) to 6 (“very often”). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .87.

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Control variables

Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Wu & Hu, 2009), we controlled for the effects of subordinates' gender and organizational tenure. Gender was coded with 0 indicating male and 1 indicating female. Organizational tenure was measured in months using five categories (1 = 6 or below, 2 = 7–12, 3 = 13–24, 4 = 25–36, and 5 = 37 or above).

To provide stronger evidence on the unique mediating role of emotional exhaustion,[3] we controlled two other potential mediators, i.e., psychological safety and affective commitment, which have been mentioned in both the abusive supervision and the silence literature as plausible mechanisms explaining why people may cease to speak out in response to abuse (Milliken & Lam, 2009; Tepper, 2000, 2007). Psychological safety was measured by Liang, Farh, and Farh's (2012) 5-item scale with the reliability of .70. Affective commitment was assessed by Allen and Meyer's (1990) 8-item scale with the reliability of .74. Respondents rated these two measures at Time-2 based on 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 6 ("strongly agree").

Analytical strategy

Following Preacher and Hayes's (2008) suggestion, we adopted two analytical approaches to test the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion (i.e., Hypothesis 2). First, we employed Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedures and performed a series of hierarchical regression analyses. They suggested three conditions to establish a mediation effect (X → M → Y; i.e., Hypothesis 2): (1) abusive supervision (X) must affect silence (Y), (2) abusive supervision (X) must affect emotional exhaustion (M), and (3) emotional exhaustion (M) must exert influence on silence (Y) while controlling for abusive supervision (X), whereas the impact of abusive supervision (X) on silence (Y) is significantly reduced. The mediating role of emotional exhaustion beyond the two confounding mediators is evidenced when the above conditions are met with these two potential mediators also estimated in condition (3) of the regression analyses (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Second, we used bootstrapping to evaluate the statistical significance of the indirect effect of abusive supervision (X) on silence (Y) through emotional exhaustion (M) after accounting for the indirect effects of the two confounding mediators (i.e., psychological safety and affective commitment) (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Researchers consider bootstrapping to be better than the traditional Sobel's test as it makes no assumption of whether the indirect effect follows normal distribution (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). In bootstrapping, the significance of indirect effect is evaluated by whether confidence intervals obtained from repeated samplings contain zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). In this study, we used bias-corrected confidence interval because it makes adjustment for any difference between the full samples and the bootstrapped samples (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). Following practice of the extant literature (e.g., Edwards & Lambert, 2007), we bootstrapped 1000 samples to obtain bias-corrected confidence intervals. These analyses were performed using the PROCESS macro in SPSS version 20 because of its ability to bootstrap indirect effects in multiple mediation models (Hayes, 2008; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

We employed moderated regression analysis to examine the moderating role of LMX on the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion (i.e., Hypothesis 3). Before conducting the analysis, we mean-centered both abusive supervision and LMX to avoid potential multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). In the first step, we entered the control variables. In the second step, we entered abusive supervision (independent variable). In the third step, we entered LMX (moderator). Finally, we entered their interaction term (abusive supervision × LMX). Moderating effect is supported if the beta coefficient of the interaction term is significant.

To evaluate Hypothesis 4, we estimated first-stage moderated mediation models based on Edwards and Lambert's (2007) suggestion.[4] Specifically at high (one standard deviation above the mean level of LMX) and low (one standard deviation below the mean level of LMX) LMX, we estimated conditional indirect effects of abusive supervision on silence via emotional exhaustion after accounting for the mediating effects of affective commitment and psychological safety. The significance of conditional indirect effects was determined by examining the bias-corrected confidence intervals obtained from bootstrapping with 1000 repeated samples (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Preacher et al., 2007).

Results

We first conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses to examine the distinctiveness of our study constructs. The four-factor measurement model (i.e., abusive supervision, LMX, emotional exhaustion, and silence) had a good model fit, with chi-square of 534.32 (df = 293, $p < .01$), CFI of .94, IFI of .94, and SRMR of .06. We further examined several alternative measurement models and compared them with the four-factor model. As shown in Table 1, the four-factor model fits our data better than other models, suggesting that our respondents could distinguish the focal constructs clearly.

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and correlations) for the study variables. As expected, Time-1 abusive supervision was positively related to Time-2 emotional exhaustion (r = .38, $p < .001$), and Time-2 silence as well (r = .36, $p < .001$). In addition, emotional exhaustion and silence were also positively related (r = .39, $p < .001$).

[3] We sincerely thank the editor and the anonymous reviewers for suggesting to control possible confounding mediators.

[4] Following our anonymous reviewers' suggestion, we also examined the possibility of whether LMX would be a second-stage moderator on the indirect relationship between abusive supervision and silence via emotional exhaustion. Our analysis suggested second-stage moderation to be unlikely because analysis showed the interaction term of LMX and emotional exhaustion on silence to be insignificant ($\beta = .14$, *ns*).

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Table 1
Results of confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement models.

Measurement models	χ^2 (df)	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	CFI	IFI	SRMR
Four-factor	534.32 (293)**		0.94	0.94	0.06
Three-factor (combined abusive supervision and LMX into one factor)	1236.09 (296)**	701.77 (3)**	0.87	0.87	0.12
Three-factor (combined emotional exhaustion and silence into one factor)	917.21 (296)**	382.89 (3)**	0.89	0.89	0.10
Two-factor (combined abusive supervision and LMX into one factor, and combined emotional exhaustion and silence into one factor)	1635.15 (298)**	1100.83 (5)**	0.81	0.81	0.14
One-factor (combined all items into one factor)	2195.88 (299)**	1661.56 (6)**	0.74	0.74	0.15

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; IFI = incremental fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; LMX = leader–member exchange. Abusive supervision and LMX were measured at Time-1; emotional exhaustion and silence were measured at Time-2. All alternative models were compared with the four-factor model.
N = 148.
** $p < .01$.

The mediating and moderating regression tests are reported in Table 3. Model 1 shows that abusive supervision has a positive relationship with silence ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$). Model 4 shows the positive relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$). Thus, our Hypothesis 1 was supported, and the first two conditions of our mediation hypothesis were also met. To examine the third condition of the mediation, we regressed silence on emotional exhaustion and the two confounding mediators (i.e., psychological safety and affective commitment) with the effect of abusive supervision controlled (Model 2). The results supported our Hypothesis 2 because after accounting for psychological safety and affective commitment, emotional exhaustion remained positively related to silence ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$) and the positive effect of abusive supervision on silence reduced ($\beta = .23$, $p < .01$), thus indicating a partial mediation effect. Based on these regression estimates, PROCESS computed for each mediator's bias-corrected confidence interval after accounting for effects of the other mediators. The indirect effect of abusive supervision on silence via emotional exhaustion was estimated as .08 with the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval as 0.026 and 0.159. Since the confidence interval did not contain zero, the indirect effect was considered to be statistically significant ($p < .05$), providing additional evidence to support Hypothesis 2.

Model 6 of Table 3 shows the results of examining whether LMX moderates the positive relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion. The interaction term was significant ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$) and explained an additional 2% of the variance in emotional exhaustion. We then employed Aiken and West's (1991) procedures to plot the pattern of the significant interaction effects. Consistent with our expectation, as depicted in Fig. 2, the positive relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion is relatively stronger for employees who perceive high LMX (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean level of LMX). The simple slope test further showed that, at high level of LMX, abusive supervision was positively and significantly related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, at low LMX (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean level of LMX), the relationship between abusive supervision and silence was not significant ($\beta = .19$, *ns*). Thus, our Hypothesis 3 was supported.

We further bootstrapped the confidence intervals to assess whether LMX also moderated the indirect effects of abusive supervision on silence via emotional exhaustion after controlling for psychological safety and affective commitment. The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (0.027 to 0.192) suggested that the conditional indirect effect of abusive supervision on silence through emotional exhaustion was positive and significant (indirect effect = $.504 \times .185 = .09$, $p < .05$) at high LMX but not significant at low LMX (indirect effect = $.192 \times .185 = .04$ and 95% confidence interval is -0.004 and 0.112). Therefore, we have evidence to support our Hypothesis 4.

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations of variables.

		Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Gender	0.55	0.50								
2	Tenure	4.44	0.95	0.09							
3	Abusive supervision (Time-1)	2.55	1.10	−0.16	−0.06	(*0.93*)					
4	LMX (Time-1)	3.39	0.89	−0.06	0.02	−0.34***	(*0.88*)				
5	Emotional exhaustion (Time-2)	2.74	1.23	−0.06	−0.01	0.38***	−0.36***	(*0.87*)			
6	Silence (Time-2)	3.31	0.93	0.09	0.05	0.36***	−0.14	0.39***	(*0.87*)		
7	Affective commitment (Time-2)	3.39	0.72	−0.10	0.09	−0.20*	0.25**	−0.40**	−0.29**	(*0.74*)	
8	Psychological safety (Time-2)	3.32	0.75	−0.15	0.01	−0.23**	0.28**	−0.26**	−0.22**	0.43**	(*0.70*)

Note. LMX = leader–member exchange. Gender was coded with 0 indicating male and 1 indicating female. Organizational tenure was measured in months using five categories (1 = 6 or below, 2 = 7–12, 3 = 13–24, 4 = 25–36, and 5 = 37 or above).
Cronbach's alphas are reported on the diagonal in parentheses.
N ranged from 149 to 152 (missing data was handled with pairwise deletion).
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

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Table 3
Abusive supervision and silence: the mediating role of emotional exhaustion and the moderating role of LMX.

	Silence		Emotional exhaustion			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Intercept	2.95***	3.05***	2.84***	2.72***	2.73***	2.78***
Control variables						
Gender	0.28	0.23	−0.15	0.02	−0.08	−0.08
Tenure	0.05	0.06	−0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01
Independent variable						
Abusive supervision	0.34***	0.23**		0.45***	0.33***	0.35***
Mediators						
Emotional exhaustion		0.19**				
Psychological safety		−0.03				
Affective commitment		−0.16				
Moderator						
LMX					−0.39**	−0.35**
Interaction						
Abusive supervision × LMX						0.18*
R^2	0.15	0.23	0.00	0.15	0.22	0.24
Adjusted R^2	0.14	0.21	−0.01	0.13	0.19	0.21
F-statistic	8.76***	10.64***	0.26	8.38***	9.80***	8.83***
R^2 change		0.08		0.15	0.07	0.02
F-statistic change		13.91***		24.53***	12.12**	4.09*

Note. N = 148 (missing data was handled with listwise deletion). Unstandardized regression coefficients were reported. LMX = leader–member exchange. Gender was coded with 0 indicating male and 1 indicating female. Organizational tenure was measured in months using five categories (1 = 6 or below, 2 = 7–12, 3 = 13–24, 4 = 25–36, and 5 = 37 or above).
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Discussion

Abusive supervision has been regarded as a costly organizational problem that warrants continued investigation (Martinko et al., 2013; Tepper, 2007). Using two-phase data collected in China, we found that abusive supervision predicted subordinates' emotional exhaustion, which further promoted their decision to remain silent in the workplace. In addition, our results revealed that the presence of high LMX magnified the detrimental impact of perceived supervisory abuse on victims' emotional exhaustion and silence behavior. These findings contribute to the extant management literature in several ways.

Theoretical implications

First of all, we contribute to the growing research on abusive supervision by examining its impact on subordinates' silence response. Although previous studies have related subordinates' perceptions of supervisory abuse to their subsequent emotional exhaustion (e.g., Aryee et al., 2008; Harvey et al., 2007; Wu & Hu, 2009), the linkage from supervisory abuse to silence as well as the underlying mediating effect of emotional exhaustion has not been established (Martinko et al., 2013; Morrison, 2014). Our findings indicate that, in figuring out ways to cope with supervisory abuse in the daily work situation (Tepper et al., 2007), abused subordinates choose remaining silent to conserve remaining resources and avoid future resources loss. Past studies have revealed that abused subordinates engage in regulative communication tactic, feedback avoidance strategy, or surface acting to cope with the daily interaction with their abusive supervisors (Tepper et al., 2007; Whitman et al., 2014; Wu & Hu, 2013). Our results extend this research stream by showing how keeping quiet in one's workplace is another passive approach adopted by abused subordinates

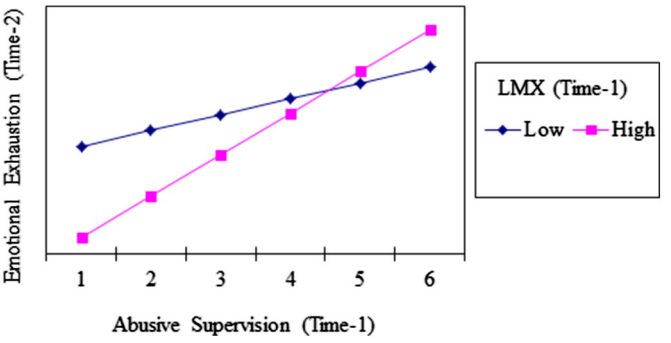

Fig. 2. Leader–member exchange (LMX; Time-1) as a moderator on abusive supervision (Time-1) and emotional exhaustion (Time-2).

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to adapt to and communicate with their supervisors. Compared with other passive responses to abusive supervision, employee silence is particularly threatening to organizations because of its widespread harmful impact (e.g., loss of critical information and creative ideas) at all organizational levels (Morrison, 2014).

Second, the results related to the moderating role of LMX further contribute to the extant leadership literature and add new õinsights to understand the boundary conditions on the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion (Aryee et al., 2008; Whitman et al., 2014). Our findings indicate that emotional resources of high-LMX employees, in comparison with low-LMX employees, drain more quickly when exposure to high levels of abusive supervision. Abuse happening in a high-quality leader–member relationship is more detrimental to subordinates' emotional well-being when the level of abuse increases. This echoes Major et al.'s (1997) work, which advocates that when job demands (or stressors) and job resources come from the same source, the focal employees experience more stress. Our results are also consistent with a recent study by Lian et al. (2012) which indicates that the interaction between abusive supervision and high LMX impairs subordinates' basic need satisfaction and leads to organizational deviant behaviors. We go beyond their research by invoking COR theory to link abusive supervision concurrent with LMX to another important organizational consequence (i.e., silence). From these findings, we can further infer that high LMX relationships may not always cultivate positive outcomes (Loi, Ngo, Zhang, & Lau, 2011). To gain a complete picture of how a leader exerts its influence on the follower, more research is needed to examine the interactive role of abusive supervision and LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Lian et al., 2012).

Last but not least, our findings contribute to the emerging but limited literature on the precursors of silence (Morrison, 2014). Specifically, our results reveal the critical role abusive supervision plays in cultivating subordinates' silence behavior, especially in the context of high LMX. The mediating role of emotional exhaustion further highlights that abused subordinates refuse to speak up to protect the limited resources they have left. Thus, the present study not only addresses the leadership influence on employees' decision to remain silent, but also uncovers the underlying mechanism. Our findings are also consistent with past findings that victims of mistreatment always become silent, especially when the perpetrators hold higher status (Milliken et al., 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001).

Practical implications

Our findings hold several important managerial implications. First and foremost, organizations should put more emphasis on inhibiting supervisors' abusive behavior considering its costly consequences. Organizations should inform clearly to supervisors about the adverse consequences caused by abusive supervision, and may incorporate rules or policies to punish abusive behaviors. In particular, acknowledging that victims of abuse are more likely to keep silent than report their supervisors' dysfunctional behavior, it is crucial for organizations to set up certain safe channels for employees to report or voice out any abusive supervisory behavior in the workplace, and also protective policies to keep them from retaliation.

Second, the underlying role of emotional exhaustion further draws organizations' attention to the importance of a healthy workforce (Halbesleben, 2006; Tepper et al., 2007). Organizations should provide additional support and resource-based interventions to buffer abused employees' experience of emotional exhaustion. For example, organizations could provide psychological consultation services to those victims and listen to their voice. Furthermore, employers could implement employee health progress program to detect the health status of their employees from time to time.

Finally, our results regarding the exacerbating effects of abusive supervision in the context of high LMX underline the critical impact of supervision practices on subordinates' well-being and silence behavior. Bad behavior in a generally good relationship still has detrimental effect and even becomes worse gradually. Supervisors should not assume occasionally mistreating an "in-group" subordinate or those who trust and respect them is not a big deal. These subordinates actually are more sensitive to the negative treatment by supervisors and subsequently act more negatively towards the organization. Indeed, supervisors should behave positively and consistently in leading their subordinates. Leadership training program should be conducted to caution supervisors in terms of the deleterious consequences of abusive supervision as well as the importance of positive and consistent leadership practice in supervising their subordinates.

Limitations

Some limitations of our study should be noted for future research. First, as our variables were all rated by subordinates and our mediator and criterion variable were collected at the same time due to the length of the training course, common method bias could not be completely ruled out (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). As such, the causality among our study relationships should also be taken with caution. While cross-lagged design is more useful in establishing causality, collecting data from multiple sources over a longer period of time is also a feasible option and can help to alleviate the potential threat of common method bias.

Second, our survey was conducted in one city of China, which limits the generalizability of our findings to other cultural contexts. Future research can investigate whether the relationships identified here can also be applied in a cross-cultural context. Correspondingly, adding cultural dimensions (e.g., power distance) to understand how employees feel and react to leadership behavior and relationship with the leader is another promising direction (Martinko et al., 2013; Tepper, 2007). For example, high-power-distance subordinates are more susceptible to the threats in the workplace and perceive that their supervisors have more power over valuable resources (Morrison & Rothman, 2009). As a result, we may expect that they tend to appraise supervisory abuse as more intimidating to their well-being and adopt silence more frequently than their low-power-distance counterparts.

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Avenues for future research

Our research also provides several promising directions for future research on leadership and silence. First of all, the increasing detrimental impact of abusive supervision in the context of high LMX found in our study opens up insightful avenues for future leadership research. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of leader influencing process, we advise researchers to simultaneously consider both leadership behavior and the overall supervisor–subordinate relationship quality. For example, event-based scenario design could be a plausible way to better understand abusive supervision and its interactive impact with LMX. On a related note, exploring the possibility that whether high-LMX subordinates would only be exposed to certain forms of abusive behaviors (i.e., scope-restricted abuse) may also add new knowledge to the extant literature on abusive supervision and LMX.

Second, the partial mediating effect of emotional exhaustion implies that there are other explanatory mechanisms linking abusive supervision to employee silence behavior. Future research could expand our knowledge by examining other possible mediators such as justice perception (Tepper, 2000), negative emotions of fear (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009), avoidance orientation (Ferris et al., 2011), independent self-construal (Johnson & Lord, 2010) and basic psychological needs (Lian et al., 2012). For instance, it is likely that subordinates working under abusive supervision would experience unfairness, which in turn leads them to intentionally withhold critical information as a way to let the organization or the supervisor suffer. It is possible that working under abusive supervisors triggers individuals' decision to remain silent rather than challenging the status quo due to the motivation of avoiding negative consequences. It may also be the case that abusive supervision activates subordinates' individual mode, which makes them focus more on personal interest and become indifferent or silent towards workplace problems.

Third, researchers of silence have noted the potential multifaceted nature of silence (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009; Morrison, 2014) with regards to different content (e.g., improvement or concerns), different targets to withhold information from (e.g., supervisor or coworkers), or different motivations (e.g., acquiescent or defensive). It would be fruitful for future research to extend our current model with various forms of silence. In addition, gauging the consequences of different forms of silence at multiple organizational levels is also of both theoretical and practical importance.

Lastly, recent research on abusive supervision has extended it to a group climate (Priesemuth, Schminke, Ambrose, & Folger, 2013). It would also be theoretically meaningful to know whether our model is supported at the group level and results in collective silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Conclusion

Leadership plays a critical role in organizational survival and success in terms of its impact on followers' reactions and behaviors in the workplace. Through the theoretical underpinning of COR, the present study examines how abusive supervision, a dark-side leadership behavior, interacts with LMX to trigger employees' feelings of emotional exhaustion and their subsequent silence response. We hope our findings could stimulate more inquiries into how leadership exerts its influence from a broad and dynamic perspective, by simultaneously considering leadership behavior and leader–follower relationship quality.

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Please cite this article as: Xu, A.J., et al., The bad boss takes it all: How abusive supervision and leader–member exchange interact to influence employee silence, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.03.002

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