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How abusive supervision affects unethical pro-organisational behaviour: A moderated mediation examination of exchange and proactive personality

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In this study, we examined how abusive supervision would be associated with unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB). Using a time-lag study design, we collect a sample of 322 working adults from a large bank in the south-west of China (female = 53.1%; supervisors = 30.4%; mean age = 30–40 years, SD = 0.71 years). Following mediating and moderating analyses, our results reveal that both economic and social exchange mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and UPB. Further, we found that the strength of this mediation effect differs between subordinates with high and low proactive personality predispositions. Our results suggest a need to train supervisors to adopt compassionate supervision which would enable employees to meet organisation goals without engaging in UPB.

Keywords: abusive supervision, economic exchange, proactive personality, social exchange, unethical pro-organisational behaviour

Introduction

Unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB) is when employees breach ethical conduct perceiving to advance the interests of the organisation rather than their direct self-interest (Umphress et al., 2010). Examples include withholding negative information about one's company or products to benefit one's organisation, or falsifying financial information to make one's organisation look good (Umphress et al., 2010; Tian & Peterson, 2016). These UPBs are directly pro-organisation, although the undue advantage to the organisation from these unethical practices would also indirectly benefit the employee (e.g., unfair performance ratings, bonus payments). Risk for UPB is high in the banking industry (Javed et al., 2019; Qian et al., 2020). Worldwide, these behaviours have gained specific attention (Zaal, Jeurissen, & Groenland, 2019).

Supervisor predispositions influence their subordinates' probability to engage in UPB (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2020; Mesdaghinia et al., 2019; Miao et al., 2013). Moreover, work supervisors are an important driving force of how employees construe exchanges with the organisation (Chiaburu et al., 2011). Abusive supervisors overly prioritise social exchange relationships with their subordinates (Choi et al., 2019; Mackey et al., 2018). They engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours (Tepper, 2000). Yet, there is a paucity of research concerning the effect of abusive supervision on UPB (Guo et al., 2020). This study sought to address this gap in the research evidence on the prevalent, yet relatively under-researched, UPBs.

Abusive supervision and exchange

Employees and their organisation have an economic and social exchange relationship (Shore et al., 2006). Social exchange is premised on a higher level of trust and reciprocal socio-emotional bonding between employees and their organisation (Shore, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn,

2003). Social exchange, encouraged by transparent and honest communication between supervisors and employees, increases interpersonal trust (Chiaburu et al., 2011). By contrast, economic exchange is characterised by a lower level of social trust, short-term orientation, high immediacy, and involving economic or materialistic resources (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003). When supervisors prioritise short-term exchanges or rely on their positional and legitimate power to influence and motivate followers, they will undermine mutual trust, making it less likely to form a social exchange relationship. However, they may still have an economic exchange relationship (Song et al., 2009).

Abusive supervisors share less information with subordinates (Ghani et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2018) and stifle employee creativity (Liu et al., 2016). They tend to exert a destructive influence on subordinates' outcomes such as destructive voice behaviours that violate long-term interests (Mackey et al., 2020). Additionally, they are more likely to encourage UPB since they have little ethics in their leadership behaviours in the first place and from denying employees recognition of their true value to the organisation (Chiaburu et al., 2011; Shore et al., 2006; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017).

When supervisors display behaviours that are diminishing and abusive, subordinates may experience an aversive social cost and distress (Lian et al., 2014; Saleem et al., 2021). Subordinates may feel the urge to make themselves look good to their supervisors which might cost the organisation when employees under-perform (Javed et al., 2019; Lian et al., 2014, 2012; Liu et al., 2019; Mackey et al., 2020; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

Exchange and proactive personality influences

Social exchange theory holds reciprocity important to attitudinal and behavioural dispositions of people in relation to their organisations (Settoon et al., 1996). Social exchange outcomes would vary by employee attitudes

and behaviours with regard to the supervisor (Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2011; Shore et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2019), or the exchange partner (Chiaburu et al., 2011; McNeely & Meglino, 1994). With abusive supervisors, UPB could be a behavioural norm for followers (Guo et al., 2020b; Miao et al., 2013; Yildiz & Yildiz, 2016). However, the relationship between abusive supervision and UPB may be contingent on employees' proactive personality (Guo et al., 2020; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017).

Employees with proactive coping strategies tend to be less constrained by their environment, while they can also influence the environment by taking actions to improve current circumstances (Guo et al., 2020; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). This proactive personal disposition may reduce the impact of abusive supervisor's lack of ethics in the pursuit of UPB. However, proactive subordinates may engage in UPB to temporarily improve the poor relationship with their abusive supervisors for a short-term economic exchange relationship other than a long-term social exchange relationship (Mackey et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2020; Song et al., 2009). It is unclear how the degree of proactive personality in a subordinate would influence the economic exchange and social exchange effect with abusive supervisors who practiced UPB.

Goal of the study

Our study examined economic exchange and social exchange influences on the relationship between abusive supervision and UPB. We also sought to determine the influence of proactive personalities in those relationships. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of this study.

Based on our conceptual model, we hypothesise the following:

- Hypothesis 1a: Abusive supervision would increase the economic exchange relationship with employees.
- Hypothesis 1b: Abusive supervision would decrease the social exchange relationship with employees.
- Hypothesis 2a: Economic exchange relationships would be stronger with abusive supervision and UPB, increasing UPB.
- Hypothesis 2b: Social exchange relationships would be weaker with abusive supervision and UPB, decreasing UPB.
- Hypothesis 3a: Proactive personality moderates the positive relationship between abusive supervision and economic exchange, such that the relationship strengthens when proactive personality is high.

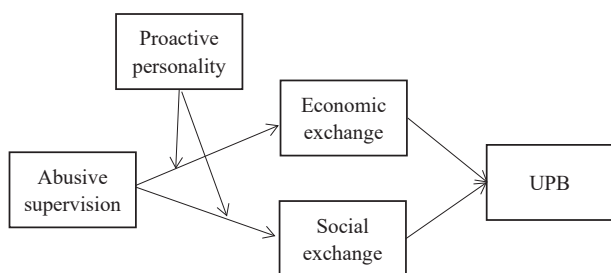


Figure 1. Research model describing the hypothesized links between abusive supervision, economic exchange, social exchange, UPB, and proactive personality

- Hypothesis 3b: Proactive personality moderates the negative relationship between abusive supervision and social exchange, such that the relationship strengthens when proactive personality is high.
- Hypothesis 4a: Proactive personality moderates the indirect relationship between abusive supervision and UPB through economic exchange, such that the indirect relationship strengthens when proactive personality is high.

Hypothesis 4b: Proactive personality moderates the indirect relationship between abusive supervision and UPB through social exchange, such that the indirect relationship strengthens when proactive personality is high.

Method

Participants and setting

Data were collected from full-time employees of a large bank in the south-west of China. The bank which consists of 29 branches, provides basic banking services and tailored banking solutions to customers. A non-probability sample of 322 of 440 bank employees were participants (response rate of 73.18%). These respondents were 53.1% female, and most were between 23 to 30 years old (49.1%). In terms of education, 78.6% of the participants had a bachelor's degree. A significant minority (44.1%) had working experience of five to eight years with their organisations.

Measures

Abusive supervision

We measured abusive supervision using a 15-item scale developed by Tepper (2000). The scale is a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = never, to 5 = very often. Sample items include "My supervisor ridicules me"; "My supervisor tells me I'm incompetent"; and "My supervisor lies to me". A number of researchers have used this scale and reported high reliability of scores 0.81 to 0.97 (Courtright et al., 2016; Idike et al., 2020; Lian et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2012; Tepper et al., 2011). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha value for scores for the Abusive Supervision Scale in was 0.86.

Economic exchange

The Economic Exchange measure (Shore et al., 2006) consists of eight items. This measure uses a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree. Sample items include "My efforts are equal to the amount of pay and benefits I receive"; "My relationship with my organisation is strictly an economic one – I work, and they pay me"; and "I only want to do more for my organisation when I see that they will do more for me." In the present study, scores from the Economic Exchange Scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.80.

Social exchange

The Social Exchange Scale (Shore et al., 2006) comprises eight items. It is scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree. Sample items include "My organisation has made a significant investment in me"; "The things I do on the job today will benefit my standing in this organisation in the long run";

and “There is a lot of give and take in my relationship with my organisation”. In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha value for scores from the Social Exchange Scale was 0.76.

Unethical Pro-organisational Behaviour (UPB)

We measured UPB with five items developed by Umphress and colleagues (2010). The items are on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree. Sample items include “If it would help my organisation, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organisation look good” and “If it would help my organisation, I would exaggerate the truth about my company’s products or services to customers and clients.” In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha value for scores from the UPB scale was 0.80.

Proactive personality

The Proactive Personality Scale (Seibert et al., 1999) consists of 10-item scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree. Sample items include “I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life”; “Wherever I have been, I have been a powerful force for constructive change”; and “Nothing is more exciting than seeing my ideas turn into reality”. In the present study, scores from the Proactive personality measure achieved a Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.81.

Control variables

We controlled for individual demographics variables (including age, gender, tenure, and job position) since previous researches suggest that these variables may influence UPB (Guo et al., 2020; Umphress et al., 2010). Additionally, we controlled the socially desirability using Fischer and Fick’s (1993) 6-item scale (Cronbach’s alpha was 0.81 in the present study).

Procedure

The Ethical Committee of the Department of Management Zunyi Medical University approved the study (ethics number: 20210408). The managers of the banks granted study permission. Participants individually consented to the study with our assurances of confidentiality of the data they provided. Additionally, we included a cover letter which indicated that participation was voluntary.

To reduce common methods variance (Doty & Glick, 1998), we collected data in time lags. At time 1, employees rated the independent (abusive supervision), moderated variables (proactive personality), and control variables (age, sex, qualification, and work experience). At time 2,

one week later, employees rated the mediated variable (economic and social exchange). Then, at time 3, after two weeks, the employees responded to the UPB measure.

Data analysis

We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the psychometric properties of the scales using Mplus version 8.3. Thereafter, we computed moderated mediation examination with the PROCEESS macros version 3 (Hayes, 2017) that was installed in SPSS.

For the main data analysis, we implemented a number of steps to ensure the amenability of the data to the analytical procedures for testing the research hypotheses. First, we tested a measurement model including five latent variables: abusive supervision, economic exchange, social exchange, UPB, and proactive personality. Next, we compared the five-factor model to its alternative models:

- A four-factor model in which social exchange and economic exchange were collapsed into one factor;
- A three-factor model in which two kinds of exchange were collapsed into one factor and UPB and abusive supervision were collapsed into one factor;
- A two-factor model in which two kinds of exchange were collapsed into one factor and the left variables were collapsed into one factor; and
- A model in which all items loaded on a factor.

Table 1 presents our CFA analysis to indicate that the five-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 612.80$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.07), which was superior to all the alternative models. For RMSEA and SRMR, values between 0.05 and 0.08 indicate a moderate model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). For CFI and TLI, values above 0.90 are acceptable (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Thus, the results supported discriminant validity of our focus variables.

We tested our hypotheses in two ways. First, we employed a hierarchical regression analysis as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). Second, we tested the mediation hypothesis and overall moderated mediation hypothesis using a bootstrap approach as suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients for all variables. As expected, we found abusive supervision to be significantly positively related to economic exchange ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$) and negatively related to social exchange ($r = -0.23$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Five-factor model(M1)	612.80	245	2.50	0.94	0.91	0.05	0.07
Four-factor model(M2)	2137.44	486	4.40	0.78	0.74	0.07	0.10
Three-factor model(M3)	3041.66	524	5.80	0.66	0.64	0.08	0.12
Two-factor model(M4)	3233.04	526	6.15	0.64	0.61	0.09	0.13
One-factor model(M5)	3294.10	527	6.25	0.63	0.60	0.09	0.13

Note. $n = 322$; CFI = Comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker Lewis index; SRMR = Standardised Root Mean Square Residual; RMSEA=Root Mean Error of Approximation

Exchange effects on UPB

As shown in Model 2 of Table 3, abusive supervision was significantly related to economic exchange providing support for hypothesis 1a ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.05$). As can be seen in Model 4 of Table 3, abusive supervision was significantly related to social exchange providing support for hypothesis 1b ($\beta = -0.13, p < 0.01$).

Hypotheses 2a and 2b predicted that both economic and social exchange would mediate the relationships between abusive supervision and UPB. As shown in model 6 of table 3, abusive supervision was significantly related to UPB ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.01$). Results in model 7 and 9 suggested that both economic exchange and social exchange were positively related to UPB ($\beta = 0.23, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.19, p < 0.01$). However, when economic exchange was included in the regression model (model 8), the coefficient for abusive supervision became less significant ($\beta = 0.15, p < 0.05$), supporting hypotheses 2a. Moreover, the results of the bootstrapping analysis indicated that the indirect effect of abusive supervision on UPB through economic exchange was significant ($B = 0.07, 95\%$ bias-corrected, CI [0.02, 0.13], excluding zero). Additionally, the indirect effect of abusive supervision on UPB through social exchange was significant (indirect effect = $-0.10, 95\%$ bias-corrected, CI $[-0.18, -0.04]$, excluding zero). As a result, economic and social exchange fully mediated the

relationship between abusive supervision and UPB. The results support hypotheses 2b.

Proactive personality effects

Hypothesis 3a predicted that proactive personality would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and economic exchange, such that the proactive negative relationship between abusive supervision and economic exchange would be stronger in higher proactive personalities than lower proactive personalities. As shown in Model 13 of Table 4, the interaction effect between abusive supervision and proactive personality on economic exchange was not significant ($\beta = -0.02, n.s.$) Therefore, Hypothesis 3a was not supported.

Hypothesis 3b predicted that proactive personality would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and social exchange, such that the proactive negative relationship between abusive supervision and social exchange would be stronger in higher proactive personality than lower proactive personality. As shown in Model 16 of Table 4, the abusive supervision \times proactive personality interaction effect significantly predicted social exchange ($\beta = -0.14, p < 0.01$). We then adopt Aiken and West's (1991) suggestion of plotting 1 SD above and below the mean to probe interactions in this study. As shown in Figure 1, the higher proactive personality slope was

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age										
2. Sex	-0.13*									
3. Tenure	0.69**	-0.05								
4. Position	0.33**	-0.12*	0.36**							
5. Abusive supervision	-0.02	0.04	-0.06	-0.14*	(0.86)					
6. Economic exchange	-0.21**	0.09	-0.18**	-0.07	0.24**	(0.80)				
7. Social exchange	0.13*	0.01	0.14*	0.28**	-0.23**	-0.09	(0.76)			
8. UPB	-0.02	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.21**	0.21**	0.18**	(0.80)		
9. Proactive personality	0.06	0.01	0.10	0.29**	-0.26**	-0.13*	0.44**	-0.20	(0.81)	
10. Social desirability	0.17**	-0.12*	0.15**	0.24**	-0.37**	-0.35**	0.24**	-0.19**	0.34**	(0.79)
Mean	2.62	1.53	2.89	2.02	2.30	2.97	3.69	2.61	3.79	3.34
SD	0.71	0.50	0.88	0.87	0.69	0.79	0.58	1.22	0.53	0.62

Note. $n = 322$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Multiple regressions of hypothesized relationships

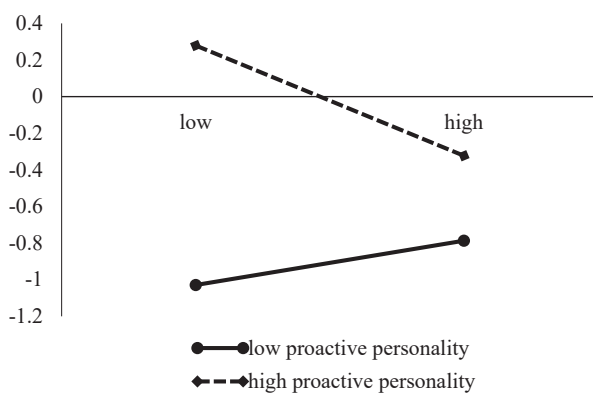
	Economic exchange		Social exchange		UPB					
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10
	β	β	B	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
Age	-0.12	-0.13	0.02	0.03	-0.06	-0.08	-0.04	-0.06	-0.06	-0.08
Sex	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.06	-0.02	-0.02	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.04
Tenure	-0.08	-0.07	0.02	0.01	0.09	0.10	0.11	0.11	0.09	0.10
Position	0.08	0.09	0.23**	0.22**	0.05	0.06	0.04	0.05	-0.01	0.01
Social desirability	-0.33**	-0.28**	0.18**	0.12*	-0.23**	-0.17*	-0.18	-0.14	-0.28	-0.21
Abusive supervision		0.14*		-0.16**		0.16**		0.15*		0.21**
Economic exchange							0.15**	0.13*		
Social exchange									0.24***	0.27***
F	13.90***	12.56***	10.06***	9.76***	4.63***	5.35***	5.01***	5.28**	7.40***	8.55**
R^2	0.15	0.17	0.11	0.13	0.06	0.08	0.07	0.09	0.10	0.14
Adjusted R^2	0.14	0.15	0.10	0.12	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.09	0.12
ΔR^2		0.02*		0.02**		0.02**	0.02*	0.04**	0.05***	0.08**

Note. $n = 322$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4. Hierarchical regression results for moderated mediation

	Economic exchange			Social exchange			UPB		
	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19
	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
Age	-0.12	-0.13	0.05	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Tenure	-0.08	-0.07	-0.19**	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.13	0.13	0.14*
Position	0.08	0.09	0.11	0.23	0.22***	0.13*	0.04	0.04	0.01*
Social desirability	-0.33***	-0.28***	-0.33***	0.18***	0.12*	0.04	-0.26***	-0.22***	-0.24***
Abusive supervision		0.14*	0.17**		-0.16**	-0.11*		0.12*	0.14*
Proactive personality			0.07			0.35***			0.12*
Abusive supervision *Proactive personality			-0.02			-0.14**			-0.05
R ²	0.15	0.17	0.19	0.11	0.13	0.26	0.08	0.09	0.12
Adjusted R ²	0.14	0.15	0.17	0.10	0.12	0.24	0.07	0.08	0.09
ΔR^2		0.02*	0.00		0.02**	0.02**		0.01*	0.01

Note. $n = 322$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

**Figure 2.** Interaction of abusive and proactive personality on social exchange

significant ($b = -0.2165$, $t = -3.4930$, $p < 0.001$); whereas the lower proactive personality slope was not significant ($b = 0.0302$, $t = 0.4964$, n.s.). Therefore, we found support for Hypothesis 3b.

Finally, to test our hypotheses that proactive personality moderates the above mediation effects, we conducted moderated mediation analyses via the following steps. Hypothesis 4b predicted that proactive personality would moderate the indirect effect of abusive supervision on UPB through economic and social exchange, such that the indirect effect would be stronger in the presence of higher proactive personality contexts than lower proactive personality contexts. We followed Bauer and colleagues' (2006) approach to assess the conditional indirect effect at lower and higher values of proactive personality. The results showed that the conditional indirect effect was negative for higher proactive personality [$\rho = -0.1278$, 95% CI $(-0.2802, -0.0019)$]. Thus, we found that the conditional indirect effect was stronger for higher proactive personality contexts than lower proactive personality contexts because we found a significant effect for higher proactive personality contexts, a non-significant effect for lower proactive personality contexts, and the 95% CIs did not overlap across lower and higher proactive personality contexts. Therefore, we found support for Hypothesis 4b.

Discussion

We found abusive supervision to increase UPB by lowering the social exchange and increasing economic exchange. From a social exchange perspective, Guo and colleagues (2020) found that the relationship between abusive supervision and UPB may be inverted U-shaped or negative for different levels of proactive personality. Our findings provide empirical evidence based on social exchange theory to show that economic and social exchange can explain why this inconsistency can take place. The finding is explained by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) as when supervisors prioritise short-term exchanges or rely on their positional and legitimate power to influence the followers for UPB. UPB is a pro-organisational behaviour (Umphress & Bingham, 2011; Umphress et al., 2010) and employees who experience abusive supervision may "identify UPB as an impression management strategy and undertake it to remedy the unfavourable supervisor-subordinate relationship" (Guo et al., 2020, p. 376) for the economic benefit. However, when abusive supervision increases past the inflection point, employees may no longer be willing to remedy their relationship with their supervisors for economic benefit only, seeking a social exchange relationship instead.

We found abusive supervision to influence UPB through social exchange so that the relationship was stronger for higher proactive personality contexts than lower proactive personality contexts. This finding is consistent with a previous study (Guo et al., 2020), which reported the relationship between abusive supervision and UPB varied with proactive personality. Specifically, abusive supervision had an inverted U-shaped effect on UPB for individuals with high proactive personality, while abusive supervision was negatively related to UPB for individuals with low personality.

Implications for research and practice

Prior studies have mainly focused on the detrimental effects of abusive supervision (Aryee et al., 2007; Ghani et al., 2020; Idike et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2018; Mackey et al., 2020, 2018; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Saleem et al., 2021; Tepper, 2000; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017), while

this study presents somewhat “positive” aspect of it in a banking industry sector setting, at least in the short term.

However, UPB would be harmful to the organisational long-term interests. On the basis of our findings, we encourage managers to make efforts to minimise the occurrence of UPB by paying more attention to their leadership styles. As this study reveals that abusive supervision may be an antecedent of UPB, organisations are encouraged to provide adequate leadership training programs and coaching sessions to help leaders to improve self-management and prevent abusive supervision. Further, proactive personality managers may provide more opportunities to employees for more job autonomy, thereby reducing risk for UPB.

Limitations and future research directions

The present study has some shortcomings. First, our study sample was a convenience sample and findings would not generalise to the banking sector in general. Future research should endeavour to integrate data from multiple industries for better external validity. Second, all the data in our study were collected using self-report measures, which are subject to social desirability effects. Future research should utilise observational data together with self-report data for greater confidence of the results. In addition, there are personal and organisational environment factors we did not measure for. We strongly encourage replication studies in other banking sectors and including other person-organisation factors we did not include for study.

Conclusion

This study found economic and social exchange to mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and UPB, differently. We also found proactive employee personality to buffer this relationship, which would reduce abusive behaviour and UPB risks in the banking sector.

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