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The impact of abusive supervision on employees' feedback avoidance and subsequent help-seeking behaviour: A moderated mediation model

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Abstract

Based on the conservation of resource theory, this study investigated a moderated mediation model in which perceived co-worker support moderated the mediation of supervisory feedback avoidance between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour. Data from matching dyads of 220 house officers and 86 postgraduate medical staff were collected from several hospitals in Pakistan. Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses supported the hypothesized model that abusive supervision first positively led to supervisory feedback avoidance, which in turn positively led to help-seeking from co-workers. Moreover, the mediating effect of supervisory feedback avoidance was stronger at the high value of co-worker support than that at the low value of co-worker support. This study contributes to the recently emerged notion in abusive supervision research that supervisees' perception of abusive supervision may not always lead to abundantly reported negative work behaviours; instead, it may also lead to positive work behaviours, such as help-seeking behaviour that is highly beneficial for both supervisees and the organization.

Keywords: abusive supervision; help-seeking; feedback avoidance; conservation of resource theory

Introduction

Abusive supervision refers to 'subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviour excluding physical contact' (Tepper, 2000: 178). A country-level study on the prevalence of workplace aggression in the US workforce highlighted that more than 13% of employees experience nonphysical hostility or abusive supervision from their immediate supervisors (Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006). The consequences of such abusive supervision result in increased health care costs, poor performance, and workplace withdrawal, which translate into annual losses of billions of US dollars (Tepper, 2007; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017).

According to Tepper (2000), abusive supervision symbolizes a workplace stressor that motivates the abused supervisees to find means by which they can cope with the abuse. Earlier research has mostly suggested that abusive supervision depletes the abused supervisees' necessary resources to cope with the supervisory hostility. Consequently, the abused supervisees tend to conserve their remaining resources by exhibiting deviant and counterproductive work behaviours (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Tepper, 2007; Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Mackey,

Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017). However, it is not necessary that abused supervisees conserve their remaining resources by engaging only in retaliatory behaviours (Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014); instead, under certain conditions, they may engage in less retaliatory or even positive work behaviours (Tepper, Duffy, & Breaux-Soignet, 2011). Unfortunately, with the exception of Decoster, Camps, Stouten, Vandevyvere, and Tripp (2013), as well as Liao, Peng, Li, and Schaubroeck (2016), no other study has examined the positive consequences of abusive supervision.

Thus, to address this research gap, this study examines the positive effect of abusive supervision on supervisees' help-seeking behaviour from co-workers, which is critical to the functioning of any organization (Bamberger, 2009). We invoke the conservation of resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to examine *how* and *when* abusive supervision by a senior supervisor doctor towards his/her junior supervisee doctor led the abused supervisee to seek help from co-workers, hereafter termed help-seeking behaviour. We argue that when facing abusive supervision, the abused supervisees tend to avoid receiving supervisory feedback, hereafter termed feedback avoidance, to prevent further resource loss or depletion (Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014). This, in turn, motivates the abused supervisees to acquire new resources through engaging in help-seeking behaviour. We further argue that the mediating effect of supervisory feedback avoidance is stronger at the high value of co-worker support than that of the low value of co-worker support. Our research context, Pakistani organizations, is more suitable for the study of abusive supervision. As a relatively high-power distance culture, Pakistani society is often described as supporting high inequalities of power and wealth (Hofstede, 2011). The high-power distance cultural values coupled with a high unemployment rate and less availability of alternative jobs for working people make them vulnerable to abusive supervision (Khan, Quratulain, & Crawshaw, 2017).

In the subsequent sections of this paper, we begin with a brief overview of employee outcomes associated with abusive supervision. Then, we discuss the relationship of abusive supervision with our focal constructs. The literature section is followed by the study's methods, analyses, and discussion of our findings.

Literature review and hypotheses

Abusive supervision and employee outcomes

Tepper's (2000) definition of abusive supervision highlights three key characteristics: (1) it is subjective, (2) it does not include physical violation, and (3) it is wilful sustained supervisory behaviour followed by a specific purpose rather than an erratic behaviour. These characteristics project the image of an oppressive supervisor who habitually yells, screams, threatens, ridicules, and humiliates his/her supervisees publicly (Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009). Consequently, the abused supervisees retaliate against such supervisory mistreatment by engaging in negative work behaviours, such as dysfunctional and supervisor-targeted aggressive behaviours, turnover, and poor performance (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006; Tepper, 2007; Haar, de Fluiter, & Brougham, 2016; Mackey et al., 2017).

However, considering the risks (such as renewed abusive supervision and withholding of supervisory controlled perks) associated with negative work behaviours, abused supervisees may not always negatively react to perceived abusive supervision. For instance, Tepper, Duffy, and Breaux-Soignet (2011) suggest that, under certain conditions, abusive supervision can be used as a supervisory tool or influence tactic to motivate supervisees for positive work behaviour. Following this notion, Decoster et al. (2013) highlighted that, when faced with abusive supervision, the abused supervisees with higher organizational identification had greater perceived cohesion and a lower tendency to gossip than those of with lower organizational identification. Similarly, in a more recent empirical study, Liao et al. (2016) found that abusive supervision was one of the influence tactics that supervisors used to positively influence supervisee work performance. These findings provide interesting new insight into the positive effect of abusive supervision on abused supervisees' work

behaviours. However, considering that only these two empirical studies have examined the positive effect of abusive supervision, it is still unknown whether abusive supervision has a similar positive effect on other cooperative work behaviours, such as help-seeking behaviour.

Thus, to address this gap, we incorporate the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which proposes that employees 'strive to retain, protect, and build resources' (p. 516). Hobfoll defines resources as 'those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued in their own right, or that are valued because they act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources' (2001: 339). The core tenet of the COR theory consists of two principles: (1) conservation of existing resources from further depletion and (2) acquisition of new resources to cope with perceived or anticipated future losses. These principles provide a useful explanation of why abused supervisees engage in a coping strategy that helps them to not only conserve their current resources from further depletion but also acquire new resources to compensate their loss (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993; Hobman, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2009; Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014).

Using the theoretical basis of the COR theory, organizational behaviour literature (Aryee et al., 2008; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014) suggests that supportive supervisors are valued resources for their supervisees in the workplace. For instance, supportive supervisors help familiarize supervisees with their tasks; better fit their knowledge, skills, and abilities with their jobs; and align their personal goals with departmental and organizational goals. Thus, the absence of this valued resource, resulting from perceived abusive supervision, triggers a perception of resource loss which motivates supervisees to conserve their current resources from any further loss and acquire new valued resources to compensate for the lost resources (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993; Tepper, 2000). To conserve further resource loss, supervisees may use either an active coping strategy, such as showing aggressive retaliatory behaviour as reported in a multitude of studies (Tepper, 2007; Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Geider, Hu, & Hua, 2009; Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017), or a passive coping strategy, such as feedback avoidance (Hobfoll, 2001; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014). Given that supervisors have the authority of allocating many valued resources to supervisees, such as performance appraisal, training, and promotion opportunities, abused supervisees are more likely to prefer feedback avoidance to an aggressive retaliatory behaviour to conserve their remaining resources (Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014).

Abusive supervision and feedback avoidance

Moss, Sanchez, Brumbaugh, and Borkowski define feedback avoidance behaviour as 'a proactive, purposeful, and intentional feedback management strategy, which involves active behaviours directed at evading feedback' (2009: 647). Building on the COR theory, we argue that when faced with abusive supervision, abused supervisees used feedback avoidance as a coping strategy to conserve their remaining resources and prevent further resource loss that they might experience when facing further abuse while receiving supervisory feedback. This argument is in alignment with findings of many previous studies which reported avoidance as the most likely selected coping strategy to manage unwanted relationships. For instance, Hess (2000) argued that individuals often tend to use a distance-keeping strategy, either physically or psychologically, to cope with the unappealing relationships. Tepper (2007) reported that the abused employees were more likely to 'engage in avoidance behaviours to alleviate the discomfort associated with threatening people and situations' than those who did not perceive abuse (p. 1171). Whitman, Halbesleben, and Holmes (2014) reported that abusive supervision was positively associated with feedback avoidance.

Thus, building on the COR theory and the cited findings, we hypothesize the following relationship:

Hypothesis 1: Supervisees' perceptions of abusive supervision are positively related to their feedback avoidance behaviour.

Until now, we have discussed how supervisees are likely to use feedback avoidance as a coping strategy for abusive supervision that may help them to conserve the remaining valued resources. However, this passive coping strategy to abusive supervision can provide temporary relief to supervisees, but can eventually result in a subsequent increase in the initially perceived loss by not receiving supervisory feedback on their work (Halbesleben, 2010). For instance, Whitman, Halbesleben, and Holmes (2014) recently invoked the COR theory and tested a 'loss spiral' of consequences of abusive supervision in which feedback avoidance temporarily reduced supervisees' emotional exhaustion, which eventually became more intense due to not receiving supervisory feedback. However, their study did not explain why the abused supervisees did not try to find alternative feedback sources (such as senior co-workers) and remain vulnerable to experiencing more emotional exhaustion. To answer this question, in the next section we will discuss how abused supervisees not only conserve their valued resources by feedback avoidance but also acquire new valued resources through help-seeking behaviour to avoid the 'loss spiral' examined by Whitman, Halbesleben, and Holmes (2014).

Abusive supervision, feedback avoidance, and help-seeking behaviour

Help-seeking in an organizational context refers to 'an interpersonal process involving the solicitation of the emotional or instrumental assistance of a work-based colleague' for problems that employees are unable to resolve on their own (Bamberger, 2009: 51). When facing difficulty in the workplace, either emotional or task related, employees may seek help from both internal resources, such as supervisor and co-workers, and external resources, such as family and relatives. However, we argue that when facing abusive supervision, the abused supervisees seek help from internal resources more than external resources. Our argument is in agreement with both social support and help-seeking literature. For instance, social support literature (Lepore, 1992; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002) suggests that losing social support from one source, such as supervisor, may be compensated by gaining support from another source, such as co-workers. Similarly, help-seeking literature (Bamberger, 2009) also suggests that employees are more likely to seek help from socially proximate others, such as co-workers, who have more opportunities to provide the required help with fewer chances of refusal. Furthermore, seeking help from co-workers becomes more salient for employees facing abusive supervision and opting for the feedback avoidance approach.

Following the above discussion and the theoretical basis of the COR theory, we argue that supervisees' adoption of feedback avoidance against abusive supervisors not only (temporarily) prevents further resource loss but also motivates them to acquire new (long-term) resources by engaging in help-seeking behaviour. These newly acquired resources would compensate not only their perceived past resource loss but also the anticipated future resource loss (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993). Our argument is in line with help-seeking literature, which suggests that when facing the uncertain and problematic situation, individuals seek help from co-workers for sharing ideas, feedback, information, and expert opinion (cf. Bamberger, 2009). Therefore, when facing the problem of feedback avoidance resulting from abusive supervision, the abused supervisees are very likely to engage in help-seeking behaviour to better perform their work without supervisory feedback.

Thus, based on these arguments, we hypothesize the following relationships:

- Hypothesis 2: Supervisees' feedback avoidance is positively related to their help-seeking behaviour.
- Hypothesis 3: Supervisees' feedback avoidance mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour.

To this point, we have discussed how supervisees' perceptions of abusive supervision motivate them for feedback avoidance and the subsequent engagement in help-seeking behaviour (see

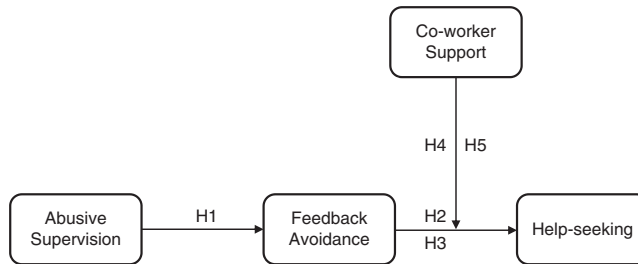


Figure 1. Hypothesized model of abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour relationship

Figure 1). In doing so, feedback avoidance acts as an underlying mediator of the abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour relationship. However, we have not yet discussed the boundary condition that can affect this mediating mechanism either positively or negatively. We argue co-worker support as the moderating factor between feedback avoidance and help-seeking behaviour relationship.

Moderating effect of co-worker support

Although, the COR theory argues co-worker support as an important source of acquiring new resources, particularly after feedback avoidance, through help-seeking behaviour. Still, it does not imply that the requested support will be granted. Help-seeking literature suggests that help-seeking does have some cost to be paid by the help-seeker, such as depletion of time and energy, feeling of incompetence and inferiority to those from whom the help is requested (Bamberger, 2009). Thus, on the one hand, the help-seeking behaviour may outweigh the benefits over the costs of help-seeking in diminishing the perceived loss incurred by feedback avoidance. On the other hand, the unsuccessful help-seeking behaviour may outweigh the costs over the benefits of help-seeking. In line with this reasoning, we argue that abused supervisees' perceptions of co-worker support play a crucial role in making such cost-benefit analysis. For instance, abused supervisees' perceptions of high co-worker support may assure them that the required support is available and thus, they are more likely to engage in the help-seeking behaviour. On the contrary, their perceptions of low co-worker support may discourage them that the required support is less or not available and thus, they are less likely to engage in the help-seeking behaviour.

Accordingly, we argue that co-worker support acts as a boundary condition for the mediating effect of feedback avoidance between the supervisees' perceptions of abusive supervision and the help-seeking behaviour. In other words, the moderating effect of co-worker support on the relationship between feedback avoidance and help-seeking behaviour makes the mediating relationship conditional on the values of the moderator. Moreover, Nadler (1991) suggested three critical conditions of help-seeking behaviour: (1) a person in need of help (i.e., an abused employee), (2) a source of help (i.e., the co-workers' support), and (3) a specific need for help (i.e., alternative to supervisory feedback), which also support our arguments for testing co-worker support as the boundary condition of the aforementioned mediating effect.

Thus, we hypothesize the following relationships.

Hypothesis 4: Co-worker support moderates the relationship between feedback avoidance and help-seeking behaviour. That is, when co-worker support is high, the relationship between feedback avoidance and help-seeking behaviour is stronger.

Hypothesis 5: Co-worker support moderates the mediating effect of feedback avoidance in the relationship between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour.

The mediating effect via feedback avoidance is stronger at high levels of co-worker support.

Research design and methodology

Research context

The consequences of abusive supervision have primarily been explored in the supervisor–employee relationship in the context of business organizations. This does not imply that abusive supervision does not exist in other work contexts, for example, in the health care sector. In fact, some anecdotal evidence suggested the existence and implications of abusive supervision in the health sector, that is, nurses abused by nurse managers (Estes, 2013) and junior doctors bullied or abused by senior doctors (Imran, Jawaid, Haider, & Masood, 2010). It is pertinent to highlight that the consequences of abusive supervision in the health care sector have more severe implications on human life than in any other work context. Thus, this study focused on the health care sector and collected data from several public and private hospitals in Pakistan.

Pakistan is the sixth most populated country in the world and is located in South Asia. The private and public health sectors complement each other; in Pakistan, the private sector is for the rich, whereas the public sector is for the poor. Most often, resources mix with doctors working in the public sector and operating private clinics. There is under-utilization of health services in the public sector of developing countries. The public health sector of Pakistan has insufficient resources, excessive centralization, political interference, weak human resource development, and lack of health policies (Shaikh & Hatcher, 2004). This complicated situation of its health system results in the majority of junior doctors, that is, house officers (HOs) and postgraduates (PGs), being vulnerable to facing bullying or abusive supervision by their senior doctors (Imran et al., 2010).

HOs are final-year students of Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) who have completed their 5-year coursework and then begun 1-year mandatory practice, that is titled house job, in any hospital in the country to complete their MBBS degree requirement. It is the mandatory 1-year internship (6-month practical learning in the field of surgery and 6-month practical learning in the field of medicine) for which they receive a salary from the hospital. Whereas PGs are postgraduate (i.e., MBBS) students of the Fellowship of College of Physicians and Surgeons (FCPS) who have passed their FCPS-I and begun their 4-year mandatory practice in any hospital to be eligible for the final FCPS-II. HOs and PGs both work under the same supervisor, that is titled Medical Officer or Resident Medical Officer, who is a senior doctor in the respective field in the same hospital. Thus, HOs learn not only from their Medical Officer/Resident Medical Officer but also from their senior co-workers, that is, PGs.

Sample and procedure

Using a convenience sample, the data collection of this study was started at the beginning of 2015 by visiting several hospitals in cities such as Sukkur, Khairpur, Larkana, Nawabshah, Hyderabad, and Karachi in the Sindh province, the second most populated province in Pakistan. Much of the data (68%) were collected from public sector hospitals, such as government-owned, due to the accessibility to a more significant number of paramedical staff in these hospitals. The research questionnaire was given in the English language, which is the principal medium of the official communication in Pakistan (Syed, Arain, Schalk, & Freese, 2015; Arain, Sheikh, Hameed, & Asadullah, 2017; Memon, Syed, & Arain, 2017).

To avoid self-reported bias and common method variance problems (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), we used a two-source data collection design in which data for the antecedents (i.e., abusive supervision, feedback avoidance, and perceived co-worker support) and demographic control variables were collected from HOs. Whereas the data for the dependent

Table 1. Sample demographics

Description	House Officers	Postgraduates
Reported data	Abusive supervision, feedback avoidance, and co-worker support	Help-seeking behaviour
Sample size	220	86
Gender	80% females and 20% males	79% females and 21% males
Age groups	21% <23 years 25% >23 and <25 years 54% >25 years	15% >26 and <29 years 85% >29 years
Experience	70% 1–6 months 30% 7–12 months	100% 1–3 years

variable (i.e., help-seeking behaviour) were collected from PGs who were working with those HOs. In this regard, we prepared two questionnaires, one for HO and one for his/her PG co-worker and marked each set of questionnaires with similar codes to enable the matching of the two questionnaires for each participant.

We distributed hard copies of 260 set of questionnaires along with a cover letter highlighting the purpose of this research and ensuring the confidentiality of the responses, of which 231 sets were returned with an 89% response rate. The similarity codes were used to identify the matching pair of HO and his/her PG co-worker's questionnaires. These codes were then erased to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents at the time of the data entry process. After detecting and removing 11 outliers and mismatched pairs, we proceeded with a final sample of 220 matching pairs of respondents; see details of the sample demographics in Table 1.

Measures

All questions, except demographic variables, in the questionnaires contained a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'not at all' to 5 = 'great extent'.

Abusive supervision

We measured supervisees' perceptions of abusive supervision by using a 15-item measure of abusive supervision developed by Tepper (2000). Given that Tepper's (2000) original 15-item measure of abusive supervision was developed in the nonhealth sector context, we conducted a focus group study (i.e., consisting of two HOs, two PGs, and one Resident Medical Officer/Medical Officer) to analyze all 15 items of this measure and adapt them to the HO and Resident Medical Officer/Medical Officer relationship context. The focus group suggested removing one item, such as 'My supervisor gives me silent treatment', which they failed to understand. Thus, we removed this item and measured HOs perceptions of abusive supervision by using a 14-item scale adapted from the abusive supervision scale of Tepper (2000). The sample items of the scale are: (1) 'My supervisor tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid' and (2) 'My supervisor puts me down in front of others'. The α reliability value reported for this scale in this study is 0.90.

Feedback avoidance

We measured supervisees' feedback avoidance by using a 6-item measure of Moss, Valenzi, and Taggart (2003). The sample items of the scale are: (1) 'I would try to schedule outside appointments to avoid my supervisor' and (2) 'I would go the other way when I saw my supervisor coming'. The α reliability value reported for this scale in this study is 0.83.

Co-workers support

We measured supervisees' perceptions of co-worker support by using a 6-item measure of Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley (1988). The sample items of the scale are: (1) 'My colleagues tell me when I am doing a good job' and (2) 'My colleagues help me when I have a problem at my job'. The α reliability value reported for this scale in this study is 0.79.

Help-seeking behaviour

We measured supervisees' help-seeking behaviour by a 12-item help-seeking measure developed by Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiksenbaum, and Taubert (1999). The sample items are: (1) 'S/he asks colleagues what they would do in her/his situation...' and (2) 'S/he tries to talk and explain her/his stress to get feedback from colleagues'. The α reliability value reported for this scale in this study is 0.88.

Control variables

Some demographic variables were also included in the questionnaire to rule out the possibility of their effects on the main variables. For instance, sex was included as a control variable in this study, as existing literature on help-seeking behaviour shows that females are more likely to engage in help-seeking behaviour than males (Bamberger, 2009). Similarly, age and experience were also included as controls because these two demographic variables may have a negative relationship with help-seeking behaviour, such as the greater the age and experience, the less the employees engage in a help-seeking behaviour because of their high egos (Nadler, 1991).

Data analysis and results

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted in analysis of a moment structures to confirm the factorial validity of the utilized measures. Following the recommendations of Byrne (2010) and Schreiber, Stage, King, Nora, and Barlow (2006), the fit indices used to assess the model adequacy were: CMIN/*df*, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root-mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). CFI and TLI values above 0.90 and RMSEA scores below 0.08 represent a good model fit (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The baseline four-factor model, that is abusive supervision, feedback avoidance, co-worker support, and help-seeking behaviour, showed good fit to the data (CMIN/*df* = 1.57, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.05). The two alternative measurement models (Bentler & Bonett, 1980) were also tested and compared with the baseline model (see Table 2). In the first alternative model, help-seeking behaviour was divided into two factors, such as emotional help-seeking and instrumental help-seeking behaviours; however, because of high correlations (0.96) between these two subdimensions of help-seeking behaviour, we continued with the single overall dimension of help-seeking behaviour as tested in the first model. In the second alternative model, we loaded all constructs on a single factor; however, it showed poor fit to the data. Thus, the baseline four-factor model was retained because of its excellent fit indices over the two alternative models. All measures showed good reliability (see Table 3). Finally, the hypothesized model was tested in hierarchical multiple

Table 2. Model fit indices

Measurement (CFA) model comparison	CMIN/ <i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Model 1 4-Factor model, that is, abusive supervision, feedback avoidance, co-worker support, and help-seeking behaviour	1.57	0.92	0.91	0.051
Model 2 5-Factor model, that is, abusive supervision, feedback avoidance, co-worker support, emotional help-seeking, and instrumental help-seeking	1.98	0.83	0.82	0.067
Model 3 1-Factor model, that is, all constructs were loaded on a single factor	2.43	0.80	0.78	0.081

Notes: CFA = confirmatory factor analysis; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root-mean square error of approximation; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations summary

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.80	0.40								
2. Age	2.34	0.80	-0.34**							
3. Education	1.10	0.32	-0.27**	0.26**						
4. Experience	1.30	0.46	-0.01	-0.04	-0.02					
5. Abusive supervision	3.14	0.83	0.09	0.03	-0.15*	-0.10	0.90			
6. Feedback avoidance	3.16	0.85	0.04	0.02	-0.05	-0.19**	0.69**	0.83		
7. Co-worker support	3.36	0.83	0.01	0.09	0.01	-0.06	0.34**	0.31**	0.79	
8. Help-seeking behaviour	3.29	0.69	-0.05	0.11	0.01	-0.10	0.69**	0.65**	0.52**	0.88

Notes: $n = 220$, and diagonally Cronbach's (α) values are given for each scale.

Sex of employees was coded: 1 = male, 2 = female.

Age of employees was coded: 1 = <23 years, 2 = 23–25 years, 3 = >25 years.

Education of employees was coded: 1 = MBBS, 2 = FCPS.

Experience of employees: 1 = 1–6 months, 2 = 7–12 months.

** $p < .01$ level, * $p < .05$ level.

regression analysis; for the Hypothesis 5 of moderated mediation, PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012) was used.

Correlations, presented in Table 3, highlighted that only experience had a significant negative correlation with feedback avoidance. Thus, the effect of experience was statistically controlled when we tested feedback avoidance as the mediator between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour. In the mediation analysis, experience showed significant negative association with feedback avoidance ($\beta = -0.21$; $p < .05$), whereas abusive supervision showed significant positive association with feedback avoidance ($\beta = 0.66$; $p < .001$). Both experience and abusive supervision explained 49% of total variance in feedback avoidance. On the other hand, feedback avoidance showed significant positive association with help-seeking behaviour ($\beta = 0.23$; $p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 of a direct positive association between abusive supervision and feedback avoidance and Hypothesis 2 of a direct positive association between feedback avoidance and help-seeking behaviour were supported.

Tests of mediation

To test Hypothesis 3 of a mediation effect of feedback avoidance between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour, we followed a two-step approach as suggested by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), that is, first testing for a significant association between the independent and mediating variable ($X \rightarrow M$) and then testing for a significant association between the mediating and dependent variable ($M \rightarrow Y$). Given that both of these conditions were supported in Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, we proceeded to calculate the mediating effect of feedback avoidance between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour. The results showed (Table 4) that the indirect effect of abusive supervision on help-seeking behaviour ($\beta = 0.18$; $p < .001$) was significant through the mediation of feedback avoidance. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was also supported.

Tests of moderated mediation

We first tested for the moderating effect of co-worker support on the direct relationship between feedback avoidance and help-seeking behaviour, as proposed in Hypothesis 4. The results of moderation analysis showed that the interaction term (i.e., feedback avoidance \times co-worker support) had a significant effect on help-seeking behaviour ($\beta = 0.08$; $p < .05$). To establish the direction of the supported significant interaction effect of feedback avoidance and co-worker

Table 4. Mediation and moderated mediation analyses

	Help-seeking behaviour					
	β	SE	LL BCA	UL BCA	p	R^2
Direct effects						
Abusive supervision	0.50	0.04	0.11	0.26	.000	0.53
Feedback avoidance	0.23	0.05	0.14	0.32	.000	
Co-worker support	0.28	0.04	0.20	0.35	.000	
Feedback \times co-worker support (interaction term)	0.08	0.04	0.01	0.16	.040	0.62
Indirect effects						
Direct effects ($X \rightarrow Y$)	0.32	0.05	0.23	0.42	.000	
Indirect effects via feedback avoidance ($X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$)	0.18	0.04	0.10	0.25	.000	
Conditional indirect effect						
- 1 SD	0.11	0.04	0.03	0.18		
Mean	0.15	0.03	0.09	0.22		
+ 1 SD	0.20	0.05	0.11	0.29		

Notes: 5,000 Bootstrapping resamples.

Total effect (c path) represents the sum of direct and indirect effects of IV on DV.

Direct effect (c' path) represents the direct effect of IV on DV after controlling for the effect of mediator.

Indirect effects represent the sum of a and b paths.

LL and UL BCA=lower level and upper level of the bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval at 95%.

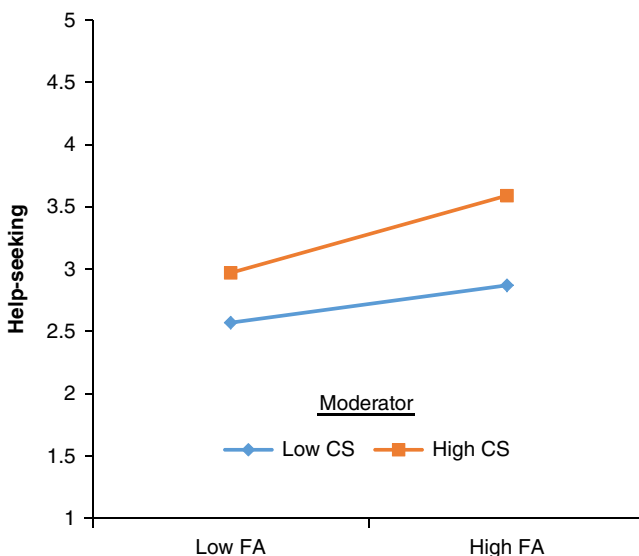


Figure 2. The moderating effect of co-worker support on abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour relationship. High CS=high co-worker support; High FA=high feedback avoidance; Low CS=low co-worker support; Low FA=low feedback avoidance.

support, we probed the interaction effect in a graph (see Figure 2). The graph showed that the positive relationship between feedback avoidance and help-seeking was stronger when relative

co-worker support was at a higher level than when it was at a lower level. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was well supported.

Finally, we proceeded to test for Hypothesis 5 of the conditional indirect effect of abusive supervision on help-seeking behaviour, via feedback avoidance. Following the studies of Epitropaki (2013) and Wiedemann, Schüz, Sniehotta, Scholz, and Schwarzer (2009), we used PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012) to test moderated mediation, using the model in which the moderator influences the second stage ($M \rightarrow Y$) of the mediating relationship ($X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$). The bootstrapped results, established at the three selected levels of relative co-worker support (i.e., -1 SD, mean SD, and $+1$ SD), supported the conditional indirect effects of abusive supervision on help-seeking behaviour, via feedback avoidance, which increased with levels of co-worker support. More specifically, the positive indirect effects of abusive supervision on help-seeking behaviour, via feedback avoidance, were significantly increased with the levels of co-worker support, such as at -1 SD ($\beta = 0.11$, $LL = 0.03$, and $UL = 0.18$), at mean ($\beta = 0.15$, $LL = 0.09$, and $UL = 0.22$), and at $+1$ SD ($\beta = 0.20$, $LL = 0.11$, and $UL = 0.29$). Thus, these results supported Hypothesis 5 of the moderated mediation effect of abusive supervision on help-seeking behaviour, via feedback avoidance.

Discussion

Much of the existing abusive supervision research has focused on a range of counterproductive and deviant behaviours to highlight the negative side of abusive supervision for both the abused supervisees and the organization (Mackey et al., 2017). However, with exception to Decoster et al. (2013) and Liao et al. (2016), the positive side of abusive supervision, which suggests that abusive supervision may lead to positive behaviours (Tepper, Duffy, & Breaux-Soignet, 2011), has not been explored. In addressing this research gap, this study incorporated the COR theory to examine the positive effect of abusive supervision on abused supervisees' help-seeking behaviour. More specifically, we examined and found support for the moderated mediation model in which the mediating effect of feedback avoidance between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour was conditional to the levels of co-worker support.

More specifically, the results of our study highlighted that supervisees' perceptions of abusive supervision motivated them to conserve their remaining resources by engaging in feedback avoidance. In further extending this line of research, our results also highlighted that feedback avoidance then motivated the abused supervisees to engage in help-seeking behaviour to acquire new resources. In doing so, feedback avoidance served as the underlying motivational mechanism through which abusive supervision translated into the help-seeking behaviour. Finally, our results supported co-worker support as the boundary condition for the cited mediation effect.

A notable result of this study is that, even after excluding the significant mediating effect of feedback avoidance, the direct positive effect of abusive supervision on help-seeking was significant (0.32^{***}) as well as more significant than the mediating effect (0.18^{***}). These results showed that abusive supervision positively led, directly as well as indirectly through feedback avoidance, to help-seeking behaviour. This is a quite interesting finding in the context that, on the one hand, abusive supervision has been extensively argued as destructive behaviour that costs billions of US dollars annually in US organizations (Tepper et al., 2009; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017). On the other hand, the results of this study showed that abusive supervision fostered help-seeking behaviour, which has been argued as a potentially important positive work behaviour for both employees and organizations (Bamberger, 2009).

Finally, it is surprising to notice that out of the four control variables, that is, sex, age, experience, and education, only the experience showed a significant negative association with feedback avoidance, which indicated that the more experienced the supervisees, the less they indulged in feedback avoidance. However, none of these control variables showed any significant

correlations with help-seeking behaviour. The primary reason for this could be that the research sample of this study does not have many variations (i.e., see standard deviations given in Table 3) in the participant's age, education, and experience, as most of the HOs belong to the same age, experience, and education level groups. Thus, due to very nominal standard deviations in these control variables, they failed to show any significant effect on the studied variables.

Overall, the findings are consistent with both abusive supervision and help-seeking literature. For instance, building on the COR theory, Whitman, Halbesleben, and Holmes (2014) highlighted a significant and positive association between abusive supervision and feedback avoidance, and also found an acceptable model fit for the alternative model in which they tested feedback avoidance as a mediator between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion. We do not have any precedential empirical findings in abusive supervision literature to precisely compare the supported mediating effect of feedback avoidance and the moderating effect of co-worker support on help-seeking behaviour. However, an indirect comparison can be made with other studies; Moss et al. (2009) highlighted a significant mediating effect of feedback avoidance between low-quality leader-member exchange and the member's performance.

The reported significant moderating effect of co-worker support on the direct relationship between feedback avoidance and help-seeking behaviour is also in agreement with the findings of Hobman et al. (2009). Their results highlighted a significant moderating effect of team member support on the direct relationship between abusive supervision, project anxiety, and project satisfaction, which improved at high team member support than that of low team member support. Similarly, Kumar and Arain (2014) also reported a significant moderating effect of co-workers and supervisory social support on the direct relationship between personal coping and work-family conflict.

Practical and theoretical contributions

Our findings support the argument of Tepper, Duffy, and Breaux-Soignet (2011) that abusive supervision may not necessarily result in retaliatory work behaviours; instead, it may also be used as an influence tactic by supervisors to motivate supervisees for positive work behaviours (Liao et al., 2016). Given that abusive supervision has been an increasingly experienced and reported problem in the workplace (Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007), our findings have significant implications for both academicians and practitioners. For instance, our findings suggest that even though they cannot directly control the incidents of abusive supervision, supervisees can control its frequency by feedback avoidance which they can get from senior co-workers. In doing so, supervisees' positive interpersonal relationships with co-workers are likely to create a healthy team and group environment with less dependency on their supervisors.

It is worth mentioning that supervisees' ability to establish a supportive relationship (i.e., with co-workers) in the workplace has been reported as one of the 12 most influential indicators of a highly productive workplace (Shellenbarger, 2000). Thus, supportive relationships with co-workers would help supervisees not only to reduce the frequency of experiencing supervisory abuse but also to increase their productivity by learning from the experiences of co-workers and saving the cost required for formal training on different aspects of work life.

However, the above suggestions must be considered with the caution that they do not imply that employers should provide a free pass to supervisors to abuse supervisees on account of fostering help-seeking behaviour. We posited help-seeking behaviour as a by-product of abusive supervision that may still result in severe adverse consequences of its primary product. Thus, employers must take adequate efforts, such as avoid recruiting supervisors who have authoritarian type personalities, introduce 360° feedback, and implement a strict policy against any incident of abusive supervision, to minimize the emergence of abusive supervision in the workplace. On the other hand, to promote help-seeking behaviour in supervisees, employers may also take some efforts, such as creating a culture of help-seeking and help-giving by promoting individual directed organizational citizenship

behaviour (Organ, 1988; Williams & Anderson, 1991) and creating a flat reporting system with a minimum hierarchy to discourage power distance (Hofstede, 1984, 2011).

The findings of this study make significant contributions to the previous literature on abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour. First, with the exception of Decoster et al. (2013) and Liao et al. (2016), most prior abusive supervision research has focused on the negative consequences of abusive supervision in the workplace. Therefore, by examining a positive and significant effect of abusive supervision on abused supervisees' help-seeking behaviour, this study provides a useful insight into the rarely studied positive side of abusive supervision. Second, given that clinical and social psychologists have well studied the help-seeking behaviour, it has been almost ignored by organizational researchers (Bamberger, 2009), with the exception of Grodal, Nelson, and Siino (2015), Lee (1997), and Lee (2002). Thus, by investigating the direct and indirect effects of abusive supervision on abused supervisees' help-seeking behaviour, this study responded to the call of Bamberger (2009) for studying help-seeking behaviour in an organizational context. Third, by examining the mediating role of feedback avoidance, this study answers the question of how abusive supervision translates into abused supervisees' help-seeking behaviour. Thus, this study not only confirms the finding of Whitman, Halbesleben, and Holmes (2014) about the positive association between abusive supervision and feedback avoidance but also extends it by highlighting the role of feedback avoidance in fostering help-seeking behaviour. Fourth, this study highlights co-worker support as the boundary condition for the mediating effect of feedback avoidance between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour as well as explains *when* this mediating relationship would be stronger or weaker on the value of co-worker support.

Limitations and future research

Like any other study, this study does have limitations that future researchers might address while replicating and extending the hypothesized relationships examined in this study. For instance, the current study was conducted in Pakistan, a rarely explored context in abusive supervision literature (Khan, Quratulain, & Crawshaw, 2017), which is high on collectivism and power distance cultural orientations (Hofstede, 2011). Therefore, it might be possible that these cultural factors influenced the abused supervisees to choose feedback avoidance and subsequently engage in help-seeking behaviour. For instance, while testing the effects of cultural factors on individuals' helping behaviour, Perlow and Weeks (2002) found that Americans (e.g., low on collectivism and power distance) were less welcoming to helping behaviour and viewed it as an undesirable interruption, while Indians (e.g., high on collectivism and power distance) were more welcoming to helping behaviour and viewed it as desirable opportunity to develop skills. Similarly, there are some other individual factors, such as personality traits and self-esteem, which might also influence one's help-seeking behaviour. Therefore, it would be interesting if future researchers replicate this study using two samples, that is, one with low and the other with high scores on collectivism and power distance cultural orientations, to examine whether these individual and cultural factors influence the relationships studied in this paper. In addition, this study used sample from health care sector which has a specific workplace environment and it might have affected the results. In future, we propose that the researchers should extend the findings of this study to other industries/sectors for strengthening the understanding of this effect.

Although the findings of this study are in agreement with both abusive supervision and help-seeking theories, these findings are our inferences which are drawn from the cross-sectional data used in this study. Therefore, future researchers might incorporate longitudinal or time lag design to examine causality of the model tested in this research. For instance, at time one, they measure employees' perceptions of abusive supervision and co-worker support. Then, at time two, they measure feedback avoidance, and finally, at time three they measure help-seeking behaviour to test whether the causal connection between the studied relationships holds. Furthermore, although this study controlled for the effect of gender and found that it has no

significant association with any of the dependent variables, findings of this study might still be affected by its female-dominated research sample. Thus, future research may employ a more gender-balanced research sample to extend the generalizability of findings of this study.

Another limitation of this study is that we did not measure the group or co-worker perceptions of abusive supervision and their effect on help-seeking behaviour. For instance, employees are more likely to engage in help-seeking and the co-workers are more likely to show help-giving when both the help-seeker and the help-giver are victims of the same supervisory abuse or at least hold similar perceptions. Thus, it would be interesting to measure both individual and group-level perceptions of abusive supervision and their relative effects on both help-seeking and help-giving behaviours. Furthermore, our results showed that despite some potential costs associated with help-seeking, abusive supervision has significant direct as well as indirect positive effects on help-seeking behaviour. From this finding, we inferred that the cost of being continually abused while obtaining feedback or reducing the frequency of being abused by avoiding feedback outweighs the cost associated with help-seeking behaviour. Thus, future research may usefully examine the impact of abusive supervision on employees' cost and benefit analysis of help-seeking behaviour to decide whether to seek help from the co-workers.

Conclusion

This study presents the first look at the positive side of abusive supervision in fostering supervisees' help-seeking behaviour. The results of our study highlighted that supervisees' perceptions of abusive supervision motivated them to conserve their remaining resources by engaging in feedback avoidance. In further extending this line of research, our results also highlighted that feedback avoidance then motivated the abused supervisees to engage in help-seeking behaviour to acquire new resources. In doing so, feedback avoidance served as the underlying motivational mechanism through which abusive supervision translated into the help-seeking behaviour. Finally, our results supported co-worker support as the boundary condition for the cited mediation effect. These findings suggest that abusive supervision may not always result in abundantly acknowledged deviant and counterproductive behaviours; instead in some instances, it may also lead to positive work behaviours such as help-seeking, which is crucial to both supervisees and the organization. This study makes useful contributions to both abusive supervision and help-seeking literatures and offers important managerial implications.

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