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Impact of Subordinate Work-life Conflict on Abusive Supervision: A Moderated Serial Mediation Model

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how subordinate work-life conflict contributes to abusive supervision through a moderated serial mediation model, grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. Using data from 350 employees and 70 supervisors in public sector health organizations in Pakistan, the study examines the serial mediating roles of subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion. The findings demonstrate that work-life conflict leads to subordinate disengagement, which depletes supervisors' emotional resources, heightening emotional exhaustion and triggering abusive supervision. Moreover, subordinate conscientiousness moderates the link between work-life conflict and disengagement, though its influence on the entire serial mediation pathway is less pronounced. The results emphasize the importance of addressing work-life conflict to mitigate its negative organizational outcomes. Practical recommendations include implementing workload management strategies, fostering supportive workplace environments, and recognizing the role of individual traits such as conscientiousness in shaping these dynamics. By integrating these insights, organizations can proactively reduce disengagement and emotional exhaustion, thereby minimizing the risk of abusive supervision.

Introduction

Abusive supervision is one of the most insidious forms of workplace aggression, characterized by the repeated mistreatment of subordinates by their supervisors, without the involvement of physical violence (Tepper, 2000). There is considerable prevalence of this phenomenon and has been found to be linked to a myriad of detrimental sequential outcomes such as lowered job satisfaction at the individual level and increased stress and heightened turnover intentions within the organizational context (Tepper, 2007). Furthermore, abusive supervision extends its damaging effects beyond the workplace, impacting the psychological well-being of employees and disrupting their work-life balance (Tepper, 2000; Zhang & Liao, 2015). In light of these negative consequences, it is crucial to understand the underlying mechanisms that contribute to abusive supervision.

While considerable research has focused on the outcomes of abusive supervision, less attention has been paid to its antecedents (Martinko et al., 2013; Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). One significant yet under-explored factor that contributes to abusive supervision is subordinate work-life conflict. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define work life conflict as occurring when the demands of the place interfere with a person's private life resulting in increased stress, dissatisfaction, and disengagement. Worsening emotional strain and stress arising out of subordinate work life conflict could finally erupt as supervisory aggression. The relationship between work-life conflict and abusive supervision, however, is not yet fully understood, particularly with regard to the mediating and moderating factors involved.

The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature by investigating the serial mediating roles of subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion in the relationship between subordinate work-life conflict and abusive supervision. Eventually, employees will eventually disgorge themselves from the job once overwhelmed with the challenges of their job and personal lives, and disengage emotionally from their job, having reduced motivation and productivity (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Disengagement from work can also further stress supervisors (who are already under disengagement stress), and as an important precursor of abusive supervision (Maslach et al., 2001), emotional exhaustion is a potential result of supervisors' disengagement stress. To understand how the dynamic between work life

conflict and abusive supervision result in negative supervisory behaviors, it is important to understand how subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion operate together in the linkage.

In addition to these mediating mechanisms, this study also investigates the moderating role of subordinate conscientiousness. A personality trait that involves diligence, responsibility, and self-discipline (Barrick & Mount, 1991) — conscientiousness could be poised to influence how subordinates react to work life conflict. People who are highly conscientious manage stress better than less conscientious individuals, which may insulate the negative effect of work life conflict on disengagement (LePine et al., 2004). Conversely, individuals with low conscientiousness may be more prone to disengagement under stress, which could amplify the risk of abusive supervision. Thus, examining how conscientiousness moderates the relationship between subordinate work-life conflict and disengagement will offer valuable insights into the role of personality traits in the dynamics of abusive supervision.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory is used to ground this study in a theoretical framework. According to COR theory, people will strive to build, maintain and protect their resources (e.g., time, energy and emotional stability, Hobfoll, 1989). When resources are depleted or threatened, individuals are more likely to engage in defensive behaviors, such as abusive supervision, to cope with their stress. In the scope of this study, work life conflict, disengagement and emotional exhaustion are considered to be threats to these critical resources motivating subordinates and supervisors to take actions that could have a negative impact on the workplace environment. Furthermore, insights from personality psychology, particularly concerning conscientiousness, help explain why some individuals are more resilient to stress and less likely to disengage, thereby reducing the likelihood of abusive supervision.

This study seeks to contribute to the literature by exploring the pathways through which subordinate work-life conflict influences abusive supervision, the roles of subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion in this relationship, and the moderating influence of subordinate conscientiousness. By examining these factors, the study aims to provide organizations with actionable insights on how to

mitigate the risks of abusive supervision and foster a more supportive, healthy work environment.

Conceptual Foundations

Abusive supervision is defined as the sustained display of hostile behaviors by a supervisor toward a subordinate, excluding physical contact, such as belittling remarks, public ridicule, and temper tantrums (Tepper, 2000). These can be negative for both the employee and the organization and are non-physical aggression which can cause a lot of problems. Subordinates who experience abusive supervision are likely to face higher levels of stress, emotional distress, reduced job satisfaction, and an increased likelihood of turnover (Tepper, 2007). Abusive supervision is recognized as a substantial stressor in the workplace, negatively impacting employees' well-being and job performance (Moin & Khan, 2023). This study examines the mechanisms that link stressors, such as subordinate role overload, to abusive supervision. A knowledge of these mechanisms is needed to pinpoint how stress induced dynamics kick-start supervisory aggression, largely harmful for the employee and the organization.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory offers a robust framework for explaining how stressors, like subordinate role overload, lead to abusive supervision. In accordance with COR theory, the human being will try to obtain (acquire), maintain, and protect needed resources 'time,' energy,' and 'emotional stability' (Hobfoll, 1989). The perceived availability of resources that are needed to cope with demands or resource loss creates stress (Hobfoll, 2001). In the context of abusive supervision, supervisors may engage in abusive behaviors when they perceive a loss of critical resources, particularly when their subordinates are disengaged or unproductive. A perceived resource depletion, particularly emotional exhaustion, may result in supervisory aggression as a secondary stress coping mechanism. Many researchers studying workplace stress and its impact on burnout, emotional exhaustion, and work–family conflict (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999) have used the COR theory.

Workplace stress, specifically, role overload, occurs when the demands of a job exceed the capacity of an individual to deal with those demands (Glazer & Beehr, 2005). In case of roles loading subordinates are at risk of resource depletion, emotional exhaustion and dissociation from work (Schaufeli et al., 2009; Ogunfowora

et al., 2023). Psychological withdrawal from work (i.e., disengagement) usually results from personal resources depletion (Schaufeli et al., 2009). COR theory summarizes disengagement initially as a resource conserved coping mechanism that could backfire by reinforcing further resource loss. When subordinates disengage from their work, they may underperform and fail to exhibit organizational citizenship behaviors, which can escalate supervisor-subordinate conflicts and contribute to the negative outcomes associated with abusive supervision (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Drawing on this proposition, this paper suggests that when subordinates experience role overload and disengage their work, it can spark emotional exhaustion among their supervisors which, in turn, turns into abusive supervisory behaviors. In turn, supervisors may as a coping mechanism for their emotional exhaustion and perceived resource loss engage in abusive behaviors (Harms et al., 2017; Zhang & Bednall, 2016).

Supervisor emotional exhaustion, defined as a state of depleted energy resulting from prolonged exposure to work-related stressors, plays a central role in the process of abusive supervision (Maslach et al., 2001; Wang & Burić, 2023). Emotional exhaustion leads to a loss spiral as per COR theory, which is, the waste of resources leads to further stress and waste of resources (Hobfoll, 2001). The more emotionally exhausted supervisors become, the less they will be able to regulate their emotions and behavior, and are more likely to exhibit hostile behavior toward subordinates (Harms et al., 2017). In addition to draining the supervisor even more, these abusive behaviors make the subordinate's stress worse – causing them to be more poorly adjusted, to be less well behaved, and to perform at a lower level (Tepper, 2007).

Finally, we theorize that the individual differences (including conscientiousness) of employees' impact how employees respond to role overload and its consequences. A personality trait, conscientiousness (Barrick & Mount, 1991), characterized by responsibility, diligence, and persistence may moderate the role overload – disengagement relationship. Those with high conscientiousness subordinates are more likely to manage stressors, keep themselves engaged under role overload, while those with low conscientiousness subordinates are more likely to lose engagement. This follows COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) principles that suggest that the availability of resources is important to stress resilience, as well as individual's ability to manage

resources. Therefore, the moderating effect of conscientiousness is crucial in understanding how role overload influences disengagement and, ultimately, supervisor emotional exhaustion and abusive supervision.

Building on COR theory, this study hypothesizes that subordinate role overload triggers abusive supervision through a serial mediation mechanism involving subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion. Specifically, we propose that role overload becomes a resource drain that leads to subordinate disengagement which ultimately leads supervisors to emotional exhaustion. These events might be especially exacerbated for subordinates with low conscientiousness, who are especially susceptible to disengagement, which in turn increases stress for supervisory individuals. Understanding this moderated serial mediation model provides valuable insights into how subordinate stressors can lead to abusive supervisory behaviors, offering potential avenues for intervention to mitigate the risks of abusive supervision and promote healthier workplace dynamics.

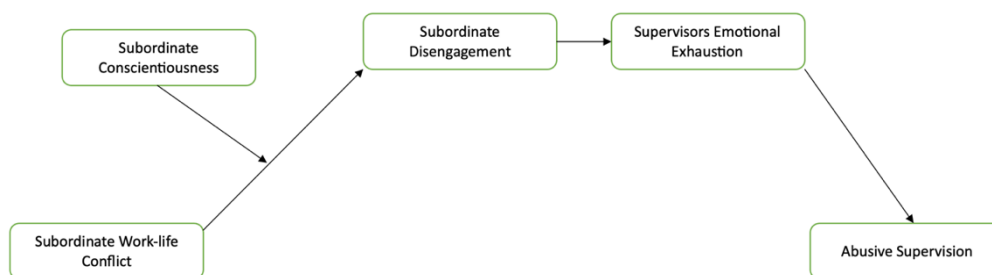


Fig.1 Moderated Serial mediation model of the study.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis

Subordinate Work-Life Conflict and Subordinate Disengagement

In this case, subordinate work-life conflict involves demands for work and personal life that prohibit the individual from performing either job satisfactorily and induce strain due to the simultaneous requirement of performing both domains (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The long working hours, job pressure and lack of flexibility can give rise to this conflict, because this normally causes neglect of personal obligations (Kossek et al., 2006). Over time, this causes employees to not only struggle with keeping both their own work and personal life in sync, but to become overwhelmed and emotionally drained, which ultimately results in their being disengaged from their job responsibilities. Kahn (1990) defines disengagement as psychological withdrawal from

work tasks and a reduced emotional investment in work tasks. Employees withdraw from workplace roles to cope with high demands of the roles that they cannot fulfill while fulfilling their responsibilities.

The idea that individuals try to get, keep, and protect their resources -- their energy, time, emotional capacity, and so forth -- is consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). If work life conflict depletes these resources, employees may disengage from work tasks as a defensive strategy to preserve what resources they have remaining in order to avoid further depletion. Disengaging from work helps workers to mitigate their stress and stop a resource loss spiral that eventually contributes to burnout (Hobfoll, 2001). Research continuously shows that work life conflict increases the chances of disengagement as employees try to keep self-sense of well-being and attempt to decrease their psychological commitment to work (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: Subordinate work-life conflict is positively associated with subordinate disengagement.

Subordinate Disengagement and Supervisor Emotional Exhaustion

Moreover, subordinate disengagement defined by emotional and psychological disengagement from work can be detrimental to supervisors. Many times, supervisors must motivate and manage their subordinate's performance and this is made more difficult by disengaged subordinates. This is because employees in this dimension are disengaged and they underperform likely to the extent that you end up with frustrated supervisors who end up with emotional exhaustion (Sonnetag et al., 2010). Prolonged stress and feeling drained, which, in turn, drains you does lead to emotional exhaustion, a key dimension of burnout and thus, not only are you less able to engage with your team effectively but also your supervisors are too (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

According to social exchange theory, this process is explained by when supervisors sink a lot of energy to disengaged subordinates without proper reciprocation, supervisors experience inequity and emotional depletion (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). As a result, when supervisors' subordinates are disengaged, the emotional resources of supervisors are consumed leading to an increased likelihood that they will experience emotional exhaustion. Research supports the link between

subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Thus, we hypothesize:

H2: Subordinate disengagement is positively associated with supervisor emotional exhaustion.

Supervisor Emotional Exhaustion and Abusive Supervision

Emotional exhaustion among supervisors can severely affect their behavior towards subordinates, leading to abusive supervision. According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory supervisors with emotional depletion may employ defensive behaviors in order to maintain what is left (Hobfoll, 1989). This depletion, combined with feelings of stress and frustration, may manifest as abusive supervision—hostile or aggressive behaviors aimed at subordinates. Supervisors who are emotionally exhausted do not regulate emotions well, and thus will likely engage in abusive behaviors (Tepper, 2000).

Research has consistently shown that emotional exhaustion is a precursor to abusive supervision, as supervisors who feel overwhelmed or unsupported are more likely to engage in aggression toward their subordinates (Liu et al., 2012). The negative effects from emotional exhaustion are also seen on the supervisor and the team in this relationship. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Supervisor emotional exhaustion is positively associated with abusive supervision.

Serial Mediation of Subordinate Disengagement and Supervisor Emotional Exhaustion in the Subordinate Work-Life Conflict-Abusive Supervision Relationship

The relationship between subordinate work-life conflict and abusive supervision is likely to be mediated by both subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion. Subordinates that experience work life conflict may disengage from work in order to deal with the stress. First, this disengagement puts more on the plates of the supervisors who must deal with the disengaged employees, on top of their day jobs. For this reason, it becomes emotionally exhausting for the supervisors to manage disengaged subordinates in high pressure work environments.

Supervisor emotional exhaustion, in turn, increases the likelihood of abusive supervision, as emotionally depleted supervisors may resort to hostile behaviors as a defense mechanism (Tepper, 2000). This serial mediation suggests that subordinate work-life conflict influences abusive supervision through the intermediary processes

of subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion. Thus, we hypothesize:

H4: Subordinate work-life conflict is positively associated with abusive supervision through the serial mediation of subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion.

Moderating Role of Subordinate Conscientiousness

Subordinate conscientiousness, a personality trait characterized by organization, responsibility, and persistence, plays a significant role in moderating the relationship between work-life conflict and disengagement. High conscientious people are more effective at working towards managing work life balance despite demanding work conditions (Costa & McCrae, 1999). LePine et al., (2004) indicated that conscientious employees tend to do better work, while maintaining high levels of performance, and are more resilient to stress.

The buffering effect of conscientiousness can be explained through self-regulation theory, which posits that conscientious individuals are better equipped to cope with stress and manage their workloads (Carver & Scheier, 2001). When faced with role overload or work-life conflict, conscientious employees are more likely to stay engaged and proactive, reducing the likelihood of disengagement. Thus, we hypothesize:

H5: Subordinate conscientiousness moderates the relationship between subordinate work-life conflict and subordinate disengagement, such that the relationship is weaker for employees with high conscientiousness.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 350 employees from various public sector health organizations in Pakistan, working under the supervision of 70 managers. The participants were selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure a diverse representation of different roles and organizational departments. Data were collected via online surveys administered through Google Forms, which is commonly used for research in organizational behavior (Neubert et al., 2008).

Participants inclusion criteria included that participants were full time employed, had a direct supervisor, and had been employed in the same place of employment for at least six (six) months. The data collection was spread over three time periods (Podsakoff et al., 2003) to reduce common method bias. In Time 1, subordinate responses to questions concerned role overload and conscientiousness. In Time 2 two weeks later, subordinates rated the level of disengagement, and supervisors rated the emotional exhaustion. Finally, at Time 3, subordinates completed measures of abusive supervision. To ensure that all data were complete for the analysis, participants were asked to complete all three surveys and only those that participated in all three phases contributed to the final dataset.

Measures

Subordinate Work-life Conflict (Time 1): Subordinate Work-life Conflict was assessed using a 10-item scale adapted from Haslam et. al. (2015). Respondents indicated their level of agreement with statements such as "My work has a negative impact on my family life" using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This scale of internal consistencies was found to be strong as was seen in a Cronbach's alpha of .91.

Subordinate Conscientiousness (Time 1): This was measured by a 9-item subscale from The Big-Five Factors of Personality (John & Srivastava, 1999). Sample items included "I am always prepared" and "I follow through with commitments." The responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale with 1= Strongly Disagree and 5= Strongly Agree. The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was 0.87.

Subordinate Disengagement (Time 2): Subordinate disengagement was measured on a 9 items disengagement subscale of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI;

Demerouti et al., 2001). Respondents indicated their level of agreement with items such as “I often feel that my work is not worth the effort” and “I am no longer enthusiastic about my work” on a 5-point Likert scale. This scale had moderate reliability, Cronbach's alpha .85.

Supervisor Emotional Exhaustion (Time 2): The 8-item emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) was used to evaluate emotional exhaustion in supervisors. Example items included “I feel emotionally drained from my work” and “I feel used up at the end of the workday.” The response of supervisors was on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of .89.

Abusive Supervision (Time 3): Abusive supervision was measured using the 15-item scale developed by Tepper (2000). Respondents rated the frequency of behaviors such as “My supervisor ridicules me” and “My supervisor makes negative comments about me” on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). For this scale the Cronbach’s alpha was .93.

Control Variables: Several demographic variables, including age, gender, and tenure in the current role, were included as control variables to account for their potential influence on the relationships between the key variables in the study.

Results

Serial Mediation Model

The first hypothesis (H1) posited that subordinate role overload is positively associated with subordinate disengagement. The second hypothesis (H2) suggested that subordinate disengagement is positively related to supervisor emotional exhaustion. Hypothesis 3 (H3) proposed that supervisor emotional exhaustion is positively associated with abusive supervision. Lastly, hypothesis 4 (H4) predicted that the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision would be serially mediated by subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion.

A serial mediation analysis was conducted using Model 6 in the PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2012). The results revealed a significant total effect of subordinate role overload on subordinate disengagement ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. This

indicates that higher levels of subordinate role overload are associated with greater subordinate disengagement.

Further, subordinate disengagement was positively associated with supervisor emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = 0.014$), confirming H2. This suggests that as subordinate disengagement increases, supervisors experience higher emotional exhaustion. The effect of supervisor emotional exhaustion on abusive supervision was also significant ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.022$), supporting H3, meaning that increased supervisor emotional exhaustion leads to higher levels of abusive supervision.

In testing H4, the serial mediation path from subordinate role overload to abusive supervision through subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion was significant ($\beta = 0.11$, CI [0.03, 0.21]). This supports the serial mediation hypothesis, indicating that subordinate role overload influences abusive supervision both directly and indirectly through the mediation of subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion.

In summary, the direct effects revealed that subordinate role overload ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$), subordinate disengagement ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$), and supervisor emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.021$) all significantly contribute to abusive supervision. The total indirect effect of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision via subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion was significant ($\beta = 0.16$, CI [0.09, 0.25]), highlighting the importance of subordinate disengagement in the mediation process, while supervisor emotional exhaustion's role was more limited.

Direct Effect						
Hypothesis	b	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
(SWLC → SDE)	0.53	0.05	10.60	<0.001	0.43	0.63
(SDE → SEE)	0.16	0.06	2.67	0.014	0.03	0.29
(SEE → AS)	0.12	0.05	2.40	0.022	0.02	0.22
(SWLC → AS)	0.27	0.07	3.86	<0.001	0.13	0.41
Indirect Effects						
Indirect Effect			Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Indirect Effect 1 (SWLC → SDE → AS)			0.15	0.04	0.08	0.24
Indirect Effect 3 (SRO → SDE → SEE → AS)			0.11	0.03	0.03	0.21
Summary						
Total Effect	b	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Total Direct Effect (SWLC → AS)	0.43	0.07	6.14	<0.001	0.29	0.57
Total Indirect Effect	0.16	0.04	-	-	0.09	0.25

Table 1: Results of the serial mediation analysis.

Moderated Serial Mediation Analysis

To examine hypothesis 5 (H5), which proposed that subordinate conscientiousness moderates the relationship between subordinate role overload and subordinate disengagement, moderated serial mediation was performed using Model 83 in PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2012).

The analysis revealed a good model fit for the relationship between subordinate role overload and subordinate disengagement, with an R^2 of 0.36 ($F(3, 440) = 88.34, p < 0.001$). The interaction between subordinate role overload and subordinate conscientiousness was marginally significant ($\beta = -0.08, p = 0.072$), suggesting that subordinate conscientiousness may moderate the relationship between role overload and disengagement.

Conditional effects analysis showed that at low levels of conscientiousness (1.39 standard deviations below the mean), the relationship between subordinate role overload and disengagement was significant ($\beta = 0.32, p = 0.004$), meaning that higher role overload leads to greater disengagement. At the mean level of conscientiousness, this effect was also significant ($\beta = 0.19, p = 0.017$), but at high levels of

conscientiousness (1.39 standard deviations above the mean), the effect was no longer significant ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = 0.47$), suggesting that the relationship weakens as conscientiousness increases.

Model Fit of Subordinate Work-life Conflict and Subordinate Disengagement						
R	R-sq	F	df1	df2	P	
0.60	0.36	88.34	3.0	440.0	<0.001	
Interaction term between Subordinate Work-life Conflict and Subordinate Conscientiousness						
Coeff	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
-0.080	0.043	-1.860	0.072	-0.164	0.004	
Conditional effect of Subordinate Conscientiousness in relationship between Subordinate Work-life Conflict and Subordinate Disengagement						
SC	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-1.39	0.32	0.115	2.774	0.004	0.0945	0.5455
0.00	0.19	0.079	2.405	0.017	0.0340	0.3460
1.39	0.07	0.095	0.736	0.470	-0.1175	0.2575
Index of Moderated Mediation						
Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI			
-0.010	0.015	-0.050	0.030			

Table 2: Results of moderated serial mediation analysis.

However, the moderated mediation index was -0.01 (SE = 0.015, CI [-0.05, 0.03]), indicating that subordinate conscientiousness did not significantly moderate the indirect effect of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision through subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion. While conscientiousness influenced the direct relationship between role overload and disengagement, it did not significantly affect the serial mediation pathway.

In conclusion, the moderated serial mediation analysis confirms that subordinate conscientiousness moderates the relationship between subordinate role overload and disengagement, with the effect stronger at lower levels of conscientiousness. However, this moderation does not significantly impact the indirect effect of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision, as indicated by the non-significant moderated mediation index.

Discussion

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature on abusive supervision by examining the complex relationships between subordinate role overload, subordinate disengagement, supervisor emotional exhaustion, and abusive supervision, with a particular focus on serial mediation and the moderating role of subordinate conscientiousness. The results support the hypothesized relationships and offer significant insights into the mechanisms through which role overload influences abusive supervision.

First, the significant positive relationship between subordinate role overload and subordinate disengagement (H1) aligns with existing theories on employee disengagement and stress. According to Schaufeli et al. (2009) role overload might make such persons feel overburdened, resulting in detachment from work. When subordinates are feeling overwhelmed by their role, they're likely to burnout and thus disengage from their tasks. In other words, the finding underscores the value of effective workload management for preventing disengagement that may have downstream effects on both subordinates and their supervisors. It is important for organizations to focus on role overload and how preventing it helps prevent employees from becoming disengaged and unproductive.

The study also confirmed the positive association between subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion (H2), reinforcing the idea that disengaged subordinates can contribute to supervisor burnout. Supervisors may take the indications from subordinates as proof of an underperforming team and may get frustrated, stressed, and, in the long run, emotionally exhausted (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). This is particularly concerning for organizations, as supervisor emotional exhaustion can impair decision-making, leadership effectiveness, and overall team morale. Knowing this dynamic is important for organizations wishing to mitigate supervisor burnout and its effects on workplace outcomes.

The third hypothesis (H3), which proposed a positive relationship between supervisor emotional exhaustion and abusive supervision, was also supported. This finding is consistent with previous research linking supervisor burnout to negative supervisory behaviors, including abusive supervision (Byrne et al., 2014; Wu & Hu, 2013). As supervisors become emotionally exhausted, they have trouble managing

their emotional response and can become frustrated and take such frustrations out on the subordinate. Your work environment is harmed and can become very toxic because of such behaviors, which ultimately result in producing negative outcomes for individuals working in the office and for the organization as a whole.

In particular, this provides partial support for the hypothesized serial mediation (H4). While subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion were found to play significant roles in mediating the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision, the direct mediation by supervisor emotional exhaustion alone was not significant. This finding suggests that subordinate disengagement is a key mediator in explaining how role overload leads to abusive supervision. Although supervisor emotional exhaustion contributes to the occurrence of abusive supervision, disengagement appears to be the central factor that explains the indirect pathway from role overload to abusive supervision. This emphasizes to address the disengagement as a prevention of abusive supervisory behaviors.

Finally, the mixed results from the moderated serial mediation analysis provide nuanced insights into the role of subordinate conscientiousness. Although subordinate conscientiousness significantly moderated the relationship between role overload and disengagement (H5), the moderated mediation index was not significant. This suggests that while conscientious subordinates may experience a weaker relationship between role overload and disengagement, conscientiousness does not significantly alter the overall indirect effect of role overload on abusive supervision through disengagement and emotional exhaustion. The moderation effect implies that lower conscientiousness may exacerbate the negative effects of role overload, leading to greater disengagement and, consequently, a higher likelihood of supervisor exhaustion and abusive supervision. However, highly conscientious subordinates might be less prone to disengage which, in turn, may ameliorate some of these effects. In other words, conscientiousness is able to attenuate the effect of role overload on disengagement, but its contribution to the overall indirect effect is not therefore null.

In conclusion, the findings of this study offer valuable insights into the mechanisms by which subordinate role overload contributes to abusive supervision. The results emphasize the central role of subordinate disengagement in this process,

as well as the importance of addressing supervisor emotional exhaustion. While subordinate conscientiousness moderates the relationship between role overload and disengagement, its effect on the serial mediation pathway is less pronounced. In order to prevent disengagement and emotional exhaustion, organizations should manage workloads as well as the role of individual level traits (e.g. conscientiousness) in forming these relationships. This lays the groundwork for further research into the complexity dynamics between these domains and their organizational practice implications.

Implications of Findings

Theoretical Implications

With a serial mediation model this current study aids the theoretical understanding towards abusive supervision as a function of subordinate role overload, disengagement, supervisor emotional exhaustion, and subordinate conscientiousness. Results extend the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) by showing how subordinates' and supervisors' resources are depleted through role overload which results in disengagement and emotional exhaustion that in turn creates abusive supervision. This theoretical extension demonstrates the importance of psychological resources, as well as their depletion through the disengagement and emotional exhaustion pathways. Moreover, the study views subordinate conscientiousness as a moderator, bringing a new perspective on individual differences in employee reaction to role overload. Collectively these findings indicate that conscientiousness may act as a buffer against disengagement and as such do not make a significant contribution to the indirect effects, however, there is still some scope for further enquiry into the interactive relationship between personal traits and organizational stressors.

Practical Implications

This study shows that the findings have a number of practical implications for organizations trying to prevent the risk of abusive supervision. Personal examples of subordinate role overload and disengagement remind us that workload should be kept under control and the role of employees should be balanced to prevent burnout. Rather than, organizations should focus on workload distribution, being careful not to overload employees with their work but also to ensure that employees are enabled in

such that they can take on the work they do have. Second, addressing supervisor emotional exhaustion is crucial, as the study shows that emotionally exhausted supervisors are more likely to engage in abusive supervisory behaviors. Organizations should ensure there exist programs that help supervisors to prevent burn out and that prevent stress, for instance by providing stress managements training, supportive working environment, and supply supervisors with enough resources and support. Finally, while subordinate conscientiousness was found to moderate the relationship between role overload and disengagement, organizations should consider tailoring interventions based on individual traits. For instance, employees who are low in conscientiousness can be supported or trained further, to deal with role overload, whereas employees who are high in conscientiousness may be more resilient to the demands of workload.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be taken into account when interpreting these findings. Second, the data used were cross-sectional, and as such they constrained conclusions of causal relationships between the variables. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how role overload, disengagement, and supervisor emotional exhaustion develop over time and influence abusive supervision. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which are prone to common method bias. Future research might include supervisory ratings of subordinate disengagement and emotional exhaustion to offset this limitation of using single data source. Second, this environment was conducted in a specific sector limiting the broadness of the findings with respect to other industries and cultural contexts. Future research could therefore explore where these relationships hold for other forms of organizational setting and diverse cultures. Finally, the role of subordinate conscientiousness was examined along with other individual traits, such as emotional intelligence or resilience, which might also mediate the relationships between role overload and disengagement. These traits could be taken into account in future studies along with outcomes of interest.

Conclusion

Finally, in conclusion, this study reveals much about the dynamic relationships between subordinate role overload, disengagement, supervisor emotional

exhaustion, and abusive supervision taking the serial mediation process into account. The findings indicate that abusive supervisory behaviors can be prevented by examining ways to reduce subordinate disengagement and supervisor emotional exhaustion. In addition, the effect of subordinate conscientiousness on the relationship between role overload and disengagement is further moderated. It provides both theoretical contributions to the conservation of resources theory and practical recommendations for organizations wanting to reduce the risk of abusive supervision. Organizations can create healthier work environments, promoting both employees well-being and effective leadership, by managing role overload, reducing supervisor emotional exhaustion and considering individual differences. Future research should consider these dynamics within other contexts, and using longitudinal designs and across a wider range of individual difference to learn more about abusive supervision and its precursors.

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