

The Impact of Vicarious Abusive Supervision on Third-Party's Self-Efficacy and Task Performance: The Moderating Role of Promotion Focus in Unethical Leadership Contexts

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Drawing upon self-determination theory, this study examines the effects of vicarious abusive supervision on third-party's self-efficacy and task performance within organizational contexts. Data were collected via surveys from 337 employees across diverse organizations. The results indicate that vicarious abusive supervision significantly undermines both self-efficacy and task performance among employees who are indirectly exposed to such behavior but not directly targeted. Furthermore, self-efficacy serves as a mediator between vicarious abusive supervision and task performance; however, this mediating effect is attenuated for employees with a high promotion focus. These findings provide valuable theoretical and practical insights, particularly in the domain of organizational behavior, by emphasizing the critical role of promotion focus in mitigating the negative effects of vicarious abusive supervision. This research contributes to the organizational behavior literature by shifting the focus from the traditional supervisor-subordinate dynamic to a third-party perspective, thereby enriching our understanding of how vicarious

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abusive supervision impacts employees within organizational settings. The study underscores the importance of self-efficacy and promotion focus as key factors in unethical leadership contexts.

Keywords: vicarious abusive supervision, task performance, self-efficacy, promotion focus, third-party

Introduction

In recent years, incidents of abusive supervision have garnered significant attention in both public discourse and academic research. In May 2024, the *Financial Times* reported a case involving a vice president at Baidu, China's largest search engine, who used social media to disseminate derogatory videos targeting subordinates. Subsequently, in November 2024, the *Taipei Times* reported the apparent suicide of an agency employee in New Taipei City, with social media discussions suggesting that abusive supervision may have been a contributing factor. These incidents underscore the pervasive nature of abusive supervision and have ignited widespread criticism across social platforms, while also sparking significant public concern regarding its prevalence and detrimental effects within organizational settings. Consequently, these events have heightened societal awareness and stimulated scholarly discourse on the imperative to enhance workplace ethics and fortify protections for employees in corporate environments. In some Asian countries, where traditional hierarchical cultures exert a profound influence, employees subjected to abusive supervision may endure such behavior due to career considerations or fear of repercussions. Employees within organizational contexts are often constrained by bureaucratic systems and hierarchical structures, leaving them vulnerable to external authority (Kong, Sun, & Yan, 2016).

Abusive supervision is defined as subordinates' subjective assessment of the extent to which their superiors consistently engage in aggressive verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Tepper, 2000). Such behaviors encompass public humiliation, blaming subordinates to alleviate personal embarrassment, and displaying indifference towards subordinates (Tepper, 2007). The unique organizational structure of service-oriented enterprises has spurred a growing body of research on the detrimental effects of abusive supervision (Ampofo, 2020; Bani-Melhem, Quratulain, & Al-Hawari, 2021; Park & Kim, 2019; Raza, St-Onge, & Ullah, 2023; Sarwar, Zakariya, Afshari, & Ishaq, 2022; Yu, Duffy, & Tepper, 2018). Existing studies have consistently demonstrated that abusive supervision undermines subordinates' work-related attitudes and psychological well-being (Li, He, & Sun, 2020). Specifically, it tends to reduce job satisfaction and organizational commitment while exacerbating psychological distress and work-family conflicts (Tepper, 2000; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Ultimately, these behaviors can impair employees' task performance and negatively influence employees' overall work-related attitudes (Kadir, Wirawan, Salam, Hattab, & Daswati, 2024).

However, prior research has predominantly examined abusive supervision from the perspectives of victims or supervisors (Li, Wang, & Paşamehmetoğlu, 2024). However, abusive supervision occurs within a broader social context, wherein a leader's treatment of others can significantly shape individuals' reactions (Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006). Recently, research has expanded its focus beyond victims and supervisors to incorporate the perspective of third parties. This shift has highlighted the negative effects of peer abusive supervision (PAS) or vicarious abusive supervision (VAS), which, from the third-party perspective, refers to the abusive behaviors exhibited by supervisors towards co-workers (Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017). This expanded perspective has offered a more nuanced understanding of abusive supervision, thereby enriching

the existing literature (Huang, Guo, Tang, Liu, & Tan, 2019). Moreover, by focusing on third-party rather than individuals who have directly experienced or enacted abusive supervision, this approach also helps to mitigate concerns related to social desirability bias that often arise when victims or perpetrators are asked to self-report sensitive or stigmatized experiences.

Given that this phenomenon remains underexamined, politicized third parties, upon witnessing or learning about vicarious abusive supervision, may opt to remain silent or distance themselves from the affected colleague due to self-protective motives. While prior research on co-workers' emotional and behavioral reactions to abusive supervision has predominantly focused on the attributions and negative consequences experienced by these individuals (Ma, Song, & Huang, 2024), the study seeks to address this gap by proposing a framework grounded in self-determination theory (SDT). SDT posits that the ability to make choices based on experience, or self-determination, is essential for psychological growth and self-actualization (Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994). In organizational contexts, perceptions of justice are pivotal as they serve as key predictors of critical work-related outcomes, including task performance (Abuelhassan & AlGassim, 2022). Drawing on these insights, we investigate how vicarious abusive supervision influences third-party's task performance in response to perceived workplace unfairness, a question that is particularly salient given the increasing emphasis on understanding the broader impacts of unethical workplace behaviors. Furthermore, we integrate the concepts of self-efficacy and promotion focus into our framework. Self-efficacy, informed by multiple sources of information, significantly impacts individual creativity and job performance (Bandura, 1989), while task performance is positively associated with promotion focus (Surachartkumtonkun, Ngo, & Shao, 2023). Accordingly, we propose the conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1.

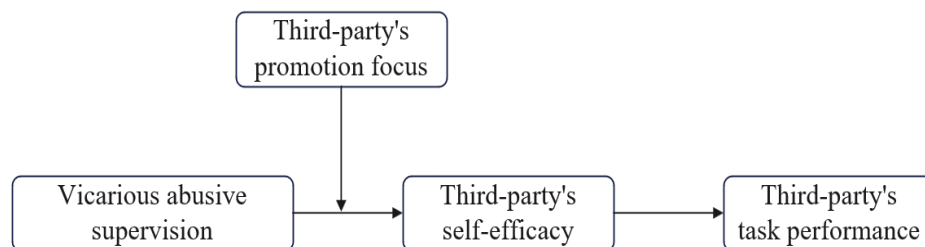


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Literature Review and Hypothesis

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory emphasizes the role of human personality and motivation, particularly focusing on the interaction between individuals and their social environments (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, 1995). In emotionally charged social contexts where personal initiative and self-direction are constrained, such as when individuals face pessimistic challenges and encounter negative social interactions, non-autonomous motivation tends to dominate. This often leads to feelings of frustration and disengagement (Kenny, 2008). In unethical leadership contexts, when subordinates experience abusive supervision, their inherent tendencies for personal growth may be hindered, resulting in emotional detachment and demotivation. This phenomenon reflects the profound influence of rigid organizational cultures, which shape the human psyche by replacing self-identity with organizational identification and suppressing individual autonomy through hierarchical control. Moreover, the rigid division of labour inherent in these systems further restricts employees' self-determination.

Vicarious Abusive Supervision and Third-Party's Task Performance

When employees perceive fair treatment at work, they tend to exhibit more favourable outcomes, including enhanced job performance (Clay-Warner, Reynolds, & Roman, 2005). Work performance encompasses both contextual and task performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997), with task performance referring to employees' effectiveness in carrying out duties specified in their job roles. This aspect of performance is particularly critical, as its failure can result in ineffective service delivery and reduced organizational effectiveness (Rabiul, Karim, & Ahmed, 2023). Abusive supervision, a form of organizational deviance, negatively impacts an individual's self-efficacy, thereby diminishing their performance. This effect is supported by both conservation of resources theory and social exchange theory (Li et al., 2024). Additionally, according to leader-member exchange theory, abusive supervision is more likely to impair an individual's performance when the quality of the leader-member exchange is poor (Li, Tan, Zhou, & Huang, 2022).

From the perspective of self-determination theory, vicarious abusive supervision occurs when a third party directly or indirectly observes or learns about abusive behavior exerted by their peers. This experience can distort the third-party's values, reduce their sense of social fulfilment (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and weaken their sense of organizational belonging. Consequently, this may lead to a decrease in in-role behaviors, ultimately negatively affecting their job performance (Harrison & Westwood, 2009). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Vicarious abusive supervision is negatively associated with third-party's task performance.

Mediation Effect of Third-Party's Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, as defined by social cognitive theory, refers to "the belief in one's ability to perform tasks effectively". Individuals engage in a situational process to evaluate their personal resources, constraints, and contextual factors, which they then use to form judgments about their personal effectiveness. When employees perceive unfair treatment from supervisors, it negatively impacts their cognitive and emotional states (Gaan & Shin, 2023). In authoritarian organizational environments, communication is often perceived as top-down rather than bidirectional, with directives or reprimands from superiors replacing open, two-way dialogue.

Additionally, employees exhibit varying levels of self-efficacy when handling different tasks. The impact of self-efficacy on performance may differ among employees depending on their specific task situations. Furthermore, self-efficacy influences four distinct task settings, and individuals with high self-efficacy tend to be more task-oriented and committed to achieving their goals (Bandura, 1997).

As noted by Shao, Li, and Mawritz (2018), when abusive supervision occurs, third parties may become aware of their co-workers' mistreatment and respond by adopting a high prevention focus, either increasing their self-protection or avoiding involvement. This shift directly reduces employees' proactive and innovative behaviors. According to self-determination theory, suppressing a third-party's psychological needs can lead to emotional distress, such as frustration, disappointment, exhaustion, or a sense of ineffectiveness. Consequently, the low self-efficacy induced by abusive supervision inhibits the third-party's overall performance. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Vicarious abusive supervision is negatively associated with third-party's self-efficacy.

Motivation is primarily driven by cognitive processes. Individuals translate their perceptions of future events into present motivators and behavioral regulators through cognitive representations (Bandura, 1989). These self-efficacy perceptions play a crucial role in shaping the anticipatory scenarios that individuals

construct. Self-efficacy directly impacts performance (Hur, Y. Shin, & G. Shin, 2022). Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to engage in cognitive processes that involve visualizing positive outcomes and focusing on favourable circumstances. This constructive cognitive approach not only heightens motivation but also provides a strategic pathway to success.

Conversely, individuals with low self-efficacy tend to ruminate on potential failures, fostering negative thought patterns that undermine motivation and, in turn, adversely affect job performance. As a result, individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to exhibit superior task performance (Feltz & Landers, 1983). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Third-party's self-efficacy is positively associated with third-party's task performance.

Self-determination theory posits that autonomy, when constrained by environmental factors, can undermine individuals' behavioral motivation, performance, and overall well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Vicarious abusive supervision may impede the fulfilment of an individual's basic psychological needs, thereby disrupting valuable behavioral motivation (Bai, Lu, & Lin-Schilstra, 2022). Existing research indicates that exposure to abusive supervision negatively impacts individual self-efficacy. As prior studies have shown, this effect can subsequently undermine self-efficacy (Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Specifically, vicarious abusive supervision can lead individuals to perceive a lack of leadership support and tolerance for employee creativity, which, in turn, diminishes intrinsic motivation and stifles the generation of novel and useful ideas in the workplace (Jiang, Gu, & Tang, 2019).

Building on prior literature, this study posits that vicarious abusive supervision negatively affects third-party's self-efficacy, while third-party's self-efficacy positively influences third-party's task performance. Moreover, the negative impact of vicarious abusive supervision on third-party's task performance is mediated by third-party's self-efficacy. Accordingly, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: The relationship between vicarious abusive supervision and third-party's task performance is mediated by third-party's self-efficacy.

Moderated Mediation of Third-Party's Promotion Focuses

Self-regulation enables individuals to adapt their behaviors to varying social and environmental contexts (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Regulatory focus theory distinguishes two primary orientations in self-regulation: promotion focus and prevention focus (Wallace, Johnson, & Frazier, 2009). This theory elucidates the cognitive mechanisms underlying decision-making processes aimed at achieving desired outcomes. Individuals' strategic inclinations and concerns shape their goal-pursuit behaviors (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). Specifically, promotion focus involves taking proactive steps to capitalize on opportunities and ensure job performance success (Gorman et al., 2012). When employees perceive vicarious abusive supervision as unjust, those with a promotion focus are more likely to engage in sense-making activities that extend beyond supervisory expectations (Zacher & de Lange, 2011). Promotion focus is closely linked to the motivation to enhance job performance. Individuals with a strong promotion focus prioritize recognition, rewards, and personal growth (Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008), which renders them less inclined to engage in counterproductive behaviors (Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012).

According to Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011), individuals with a high level of promotion focus may buffer the negative effects of vicarious abusive supervision on self-efficacy. This is because strong promotion focus sustains individuals' motivation by emphasizing personal growth and achievement, thereby enhancing

self-confidence and a sense of control. As a result, individuals with a high level of promotion focus are less susceptible to the influence of others' negative behaviors, enabling them to maintain their self-efficacy despite exposure to vicarious abusive supervision.

Individuals with a promotion focus, characterized by a regulatory orientation towards achieving positive outcomes and aspirations, are likely better equipped to withstand the adverse effects of vicarious abusive supervision on third-party's self-efficacy and task performance. Third parties with strong promotion focus are better able to maintain—or even improve—their task performance when exposed to vicarious abusive supervision (Kim, Lee, & Yun, 2020). Their focus on advancement and achievement supports the preservation of self-efficacy, which plays a critical mediating role in this process. Although abusive supervision generally undermines self-efficacy, ultimately leading to diminished task performance, a high level of promotion focus helps sustain self-efficacy, thereby attenuating the negative consequences on performance (Zheng & Liu, 2017). Consequently, third parties with high promotion focus are less affected by abusive supervision, enabling them to sustain their performance levels (Peng, Schaubroeck, & Li, 2014).

Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: A third-party's promotion focus moderates the relationship between vicarious abusive supervision and the third-party's self-efficacy, such that the negative effect of vicarious abusive supervision on self-efficacy is attenuated when promotion focus is high rather than low.

H6: A third-party's promotion focus moderates the mediating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between vicarious abusive supervision and the third-party's task performance. Specifically, the indirect negative effect of vicarious abusive supervision on the third-party's task performance, via self-efficacy, is attenuated when promotion focus is high rather than low.

Methodology

Sample and Procedure

The target population for this study comprised employees working under a third-party dispatch system across diverse organizations within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area. Participants were recruited through a reputable third-party human resources agency (name withheld for confidentiality), which was responsible for distributing the questionnaires to staff members assigned to multiple organizations within the designated sectors.

To mitigate social desirability bias, several procedural safeguards were implemented. First, the involvement of a third-party agency in administering the surveys introduced a degree of separation between participants and their employers, thereby fostering a more psychologically safe environment for honest reporting. Since responses were not collected or reviewed by the participants' direct supervisors or affiliated institutions, the perceived risk of negative repercussions was minimized. Second, anonymity was explicitly guaranteed in all communication, and respondents were assured that the data would be used solely for academic research purposes.

To address the potential for common method bias and reduce the limitations typically associated with cross-sectional designs, the study adopted a three-wave time-lagged design (P. M. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & N. P. Podsakoff, 2003). In the first-wave survey (T1), participants were asked to recall their awareness of vicarious abusive supervision and provide demographic information, as well as details regarding the prevalence and severity of vicarious abusive supervision within their organizations. The second-wave survey (T2),

administered one month later, targeted participants who identified the occurrence of vicarious abusive supervision in their workplace, specifying its frequency and severity. These participants, having completed the first-wave survey, were asked to report their levels of self-efficacy and promotion focus. The third-wave survey (T3) was conducted one month after T2. Participants who had submitted their second-wave questionnaires were asked to evaluate their task performance. To ensure data integrity, a rigorous screening process was applied to exclude incomplete questionnaires, those with abnormal response times (either excessively short or long), or those exhibiting systematic response patterns. Following this screening, 337 valid responses were retained. The descriptive characteristics of the samples are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information

Demographics	Category	Frequency	Ratio
Gender	Male	150	44.51%
	Female	187	55.49%
Age	Aged under 21	128	37.98%
	Aged 21-25	76	22.55%
	Aged 26-30	57	16.91%
	Aged 31-35	30	8.90%
	Aged 36-40	24	7.12%
	Aged 41-45	18	5.34%
	Aged over 45	4	1.19%
Education level	High school and below	26	7.72%
	Junior college	65	19.29%
	Undergraduate course	187	55.49%
	Master's degree or above	59	17.51%
Seniority	Within 1 year	77	22.85%
	1-4 years	72	21.36%
	4-7 years	39	11.57%
	More than 7 years	149	44.21%

Measures**Vicarious Abusive Supervision**

Based on Huang et al. (2019) and Li et al. (2024), five-item measurements were utilized with excellent reliability. An example item is: “My supervisor publicly devalues my colleagues”. The coefficient of Cronbach’s alpha for VAS was determined to be 0.93.

Third-Party’s Promotion Focus

The research utilized a measurement tool comprising six items, originally developed by Wallace et al. (2009). One example was “I focus on how many tasks I can complete”. The coefficient of Cronbach’s alpha for the third-party’s PF was 0.83.

Third-Party’s Self-Efficacy

According to Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995), this study employed a three-item scale. “If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution”. As one of the sample measurements, the coefficient of Cronbach’s alpha for the third-party’s SE was 0.82.

Third-Party's Task Performance

The research utilized a measurement tool consisting of six items, which was originally produced by Borman and Motowidlo (1997). A sample item was "I could meet job performance standards". The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the third-party's TP was 0.89.

Control Variables

Referring to the existing literature, Bernerth and Aguinis (2016) examined the exiting research results and found that the selected control variables mostly belonged to the demographic category. Thus, four control variables were included in our research: gender, age, education level, and seniority.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Before conducting hypothesis testing, we performed validated factor analysis using AMOS 26.0 for the four main variables: VAS, PF, SE, and TP. The model fit results are presented in Table 2. The baseline model, consisting of four factors, displayed fit indicators that all fell within the reference values and indicated a good fit for the data. The nested models displayed inferior chi-square and fit indicators compared to the baseline model, indicating the superiority of the baseline model in demonstrating sufficient discrimination among the four study variables.

Table 2

Results of Validation Factor Analysis

Models	χ^2	DF	χ^2/DF	RMR	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	NFI
Four factors: VAS; PF; SE; TP	375.896	164	2.292	0.041	0.062	0.942	0.943	0.903
Three factors A: VAS+TP; PF; SE	1480.203	167	8.863	0.143	0.153	0.642	0.645	0.617
Three factors B: VAS+SE; PF; TP	816.983	167	4.892	0.097	0.108	0.823	0.824	0.788
Two factors: VAS+PF; SE+TP	1355.905	169	8.023	0.129	0.145	0.677	0.679	0.649
Single factors: VAS+PF+SE+TP	2203.076	170	12.959	0.162	0.189	0.446	0.449	0.429

Notes. $N = 337$, VAS indicates "vicarious abusive supervision", PF indicates "promotion focus", SE indicates "self-efficacy", TP indicates "task performance"; "+" indicates the combination of factors.

Common Method Bias

To mitigate potential common method bias, we anonymized all respondents during data collection. In addition, to reduce same-source bias, third-party self-reports were employed for the measurement of vicarious abusive supervision (VAS), self-efficacy (SE), promotion focus (PF), and task performance (TP). Despite these precautions, these variables could still be influenced by common method bias. To assess the extent of this issue, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using Harman's single-factor test (Malhotra, Kim, & Patil, 2006). The analysis, based on 32 questionnaire items, revealed seven factors with eigenvalues greater than one. The first factor accounted for 26.45% of the total variance—well below the critical threshold of 50%—indicating that common method variance is unlikely to pose a serious threat to the validity of the results. Overall, the use of peer ratings and procedural remedies suggests that common method bias is reasonably controlled in this study.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3 displays the correlations between the standard deviations and means of the main and control variables obtained from the correlation analysis of the independent and dependent variables. VAS has a

substantial negative correlation with SE ($r = -0.16, p < 0.01$) and TP ($r = -0.29, p < 0.001$), and SE was significantly positively connected with TP ($r = 0.35, p < 0.001$). The outcomes were consistent with the research hypotheses.

Table 3

Results of Correlation Analysis

Variables	Gender	Age	Education level	Seniority	VAS	SE	PF	TP
Gender	1							
Age	-0.27***	1						
Education level	-0.01	-0.23***	1					
Seniority	-0.23***	0.63***	-0.17***	1				
VAS	-0.01	-0.07	-0.01	-0.17***	1			
SE	-0.03	0.15**	-0.06	0.13*	-0.16**	1		
PF	0.02	0.17**	-0.06	0.12*	-0.13*	0.50***	1	
TP	0.10	0.05	-0.04	0.03	-0.29***	0.35***	0.41***	1
Mean	1.55	2.45	2.83	2.77	1.93	3.64	3.73	3.77
SD	0.50	1.58	0.81	1.23	0.93	0.72	0.62	0.67

Notes. $N = 337$, VAS indicates “vicarious abusive supervision”, PF indicates “promotion focus”, SE indicates “self-efficacy”, TP indicates “task performance”; ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$, *: $p < 0.05$.

Hypotheses Testing

The regression analysis results of M6 showed (Tables 4 and 5) that VAS significantly and negatively affected the third-party’s TP after controlling for the relevant variables ($\beta = -0.30, p < 0.001$), thus validating H1. The M2 displayed that VAS was important and negatively related to the SE of the third party ($\beta = -0.15, p < 0.01$). The regression results of Model 7 revealed a significant and positive impact of SE on the third-party’s TP ($\beta = 0.34, p < 0.001$), thus supporting H3. In M8, after the inclusion of VAS, VAS negatively affected the third-party’s TP significantly ($\beta = -0.25, p < 0.001$). In contrast, the third party’s SE positively and significantly affected their TP ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.001$), demonstrating that SE mediated the negative effect of VAS on TP. Thus, H4 was fully validated that SE mediates the role of VAS and third-party’s TP.

This study employed the bootstrapping technique to assess the mediating effect. Once the control variables were included, the test results were displayed in Table 6. Based on the result, it demonstrates that the direct effect of VAS negatively affecting the third-party’s TP was significant (Effect = -0.276 , 95% CI $[-0.340, -0.162]$, not included 0), while the indirect effect of VAS affecting the third-party’s TP through SE was also significant (Effect = -0.058 , 95% CI $[-0.111, -0.013]$, not included 0). Thus, SE has a partially mediated role, and H4 is again supported.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Results of Self-Efficacy

Predictors	SE			
	M1	M2	M3	M4
Gender	0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.01
Age	0.1	0.11	0.03	0.03
Education level	-0.03	-0.03	-0.02	-0.02
Seniority	0.08	0.04	0.01	0.03
Main effect				
VAS		-0.15**	-0.10*	-0.09

Table 4 to be continued

Moderating effects				
PF			0.47***	0.49***
Interaction effect				
VAS'PF				0.12*
R^2	0.04	0.06	0.26	0.28
Adj- R^2	0.04	0.02	0.23	0.01
F	1.88	7.67**	49.98***	6.33*

Notes. $N = 337$, VAS indicates “vicarious abusive supervision”, PF indicates “promotion focus”, SE indicates “self-efficacy”, TP indicates “task performance”; ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$, *: $p < 0.05$.

To examine the moderating effects, we assessed the interaction effects model. The data were standardized to mitigate multicollinearity arising from variable intercorrelations. Sequentially, the dependent, control, independent, moderating, and interaction terms were entered into the regression analysis. Tables 4 and 5 present the moderating effects results. Specifically, Table 4 shows that in Model 3, with the inclusion of the moderator (promotion focus, PF), vicarious abusive supervision (VAS) had a significant adverse effect on self-efficacy (SE, $\beta = -0.10$, $p < 0.05$). In Model 4, with the inclusion of the interaction term between VAS and PF, the interaction term was positively and significantly associated with SE ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that stronger PF weakens the negative impact of VAS on SE. Thus, H5 was supported. To further illustrate the moderating effect of PF, Figure 2 provides a visual representation. The moderating effect plots confirm that third parties with higher PF levels are less susceptible to vicarious abusive supervision, resulting in a weaker negative association between VAS and SE.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Results of Task Performance

Predictors	TP					
	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10
Gender	0.12*	0.11*	0.11*	0.11*	0.09	0.07
Age	0.07	0.08	0.04	0.05	0.01	-0.06
Education level	-0.03	-0.04	-0.02	-0.03	-0.03	0
Seniority	0.05	-0.03	0.02	-0.04	-0.05	-0.04
Main effect						
VAS		-0.30***		-0.25***	-0.24***	-0.27***
Main effects						
SE			0.34***	0.31***	0.18**	0.23***
Moderating effects						
PF					0.28***	0.36***
Interaction Effect						
SE'PF						0.26***
R^2	0.04	0.12	0.15	0.21	0.27	0.32
Adj- R^2	0.04	0.08	0.11	0.17	0.56	0.05
F	1.92	30.99***	43.88***	35.37***	25.01***	24.09***

Notes. $N = 337$, VAS indicates “vicarious abusive supervision”, PF indicates “promotion focus”, SE indicates “self-efficacy”, TP indicates “task performance”; ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$, *: $p < 0.05$.

Table 6

Results of the Intermediary Effect

The direct effect of VAS on the impact of third-party's TP					
Effect	S.E.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
-0.276	0.058	-4.78	0.000	-0.340	-0.162
The indirect effects of VAS on third-party's TP					
SE	Effect	Boot S.E.	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	
	-0.058	0.025	-0.111	-0.013	

Notes. S.E. indicates "standard error"; LLCI and ULCI indicate the minimum and maximum values of the confidence interval, $N = 337$, VAS indicates "vicarious abusive supervision", PF indicates "promotion focus", SE indicates "self-efficacy", and TP indicates "task performance".

Table 7

Moderated Results of the Mediating Effect

Moderating variables	Conditional indirect effects				Moderated mediator			
	Effect	S.E.	95% CI		Index	S.E.	95% CI	
			LLCI	ULCI			LLCI	ULCI
Low PF	-0.072	0.027	-0.133	-0.026				
Middle PF	-0.038	0.021	-0.083	-0.002	0.043	0.021	0.008	0.091
High PF	-0.003	0.027	-0.058	0.049				

Notes. PF indicates "promotion focus", low PF represents mean "-1" SD (Standard Deviation), and high PF represents mean "+1" SD; S.E. indicates "standard error", CI indicates "confidence interval", VAS indicates "vicarious abusive supervision", PF indicates "promotion focus", SE indicates "self-efficacy", and TP indicates "task performance".

The mediating effect being moderated was tested based on the bootstrapping method proposed by Hayes (2013). Based on Table 7 of the test process results, there is a mediating effect of being moderated. Specifically, the mediating influence was not significant when individual SE was in high PF (Effect = -0.003, 95% CI [-0.058, 0.049], the interval contains 0); the mediating effect was significant when individual SE was in medium PF (Effect = -0.038, 95% CI [-0.083, -0.002], the interval does not contain 0); and when individual SE is in low PF, the mediating impact is significant (Effect = -0.072, 95% CI [-0.133, -0.026], the interval does not contain 0). The index of moderated mediation was 0.043 (95% CI [0.008, 0.091]), and the confidence interval excluded zero, indicating significance. Similarly, at the low PF level, the conditional indirect effect was 0.072 (95% CI [-0.133, -0.026]), and its confidence interval also excluded zero, confirming significance. In summary, PF moderated the role of SE as a mediator in the effect of VAS on TP. Therefore, H6 is supported.

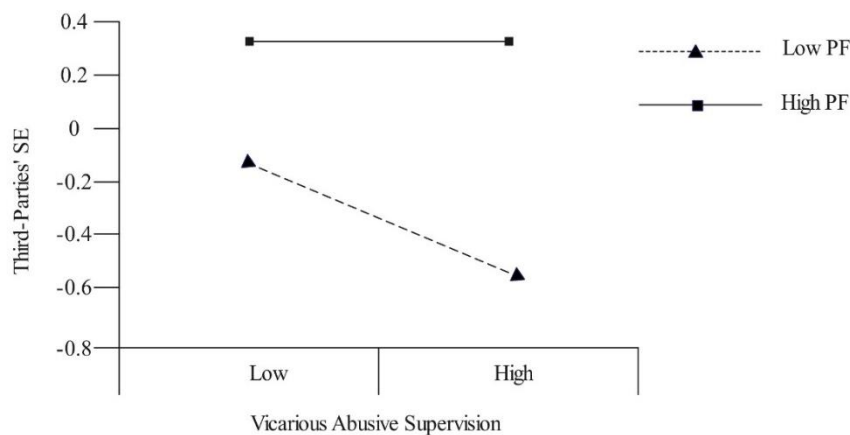


Figure 2. The moderating role of PF.

Conclusions

This study highlights the detrimental impact of vicarious abusive supervision on the task performance of third parties. Vicarious abusive supervision undermines the self-efficacy of third parties, stifling their potential and impeding their ability to contribute effectively. This decline in self-efficacy reduces self-confidence and restricts the resources available for task accomplishment, ultimately leading to decreased performance. Importantly, self-efficacy serves as a critical mediator in the relationship between vicarious abusive supervision and third-party task performance, with its decline being the primary mechanism through which vicarious abusive supervision affects performance outcomes. Furthermore, the promotion focus of third parties moderates this mediated effect. Specifically, a higher level of promotion focus can attenuate the negative impact of vicarious abusive supervision, enhancing third parties' resilience and reducing the likelihood of diminished task performance.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, while prior research has largely focused on customer-facing roles in the private sector (Hur et al., 2022), this study extends its focus to a broader organizational context where peer relationships and organizational dynamics play critical roles. By examining the impact of vicarious abusive supervision on the task performance of third parties, this research expands the understanding of supervisor-related negative behaviors beyond the traditional "abuser-victim" dichotomy. It emphasizes how vicarious abusive supervision can affect not only direct victims but also bystanders within organizations. Given the frequent interactions among employees, peers, and clients in various organizational contexts, negative behaviors such as abusive supervision can have far-reaching consequences, influencing individual well-being and organizational outcomes. This understanding can help reshape how organizations approach toxic behaviors and their broader consequences.

Second, this study explores the role of self-efficacy as a mediating factor, providing fresh insights into how workplace behaviors influence employee performance. When third parties witness abusive supervision, their self-efficacy is compromised, leading to diminished performance. This mechanism is especially critical in organizational settings that require problem-solving and adaptability to overcome challenges. Additionally, the study brings attention to the ethical aspect of these findings, aligning with moral philosophies that emphasize the need for fairness and respect for others in organizational behavior. By considering employees as "ends in themselves", this study calls for organizations to adopt more ethical practices that preserve individual rights and dignity.

Moreover, integrating regulatory focus theory, this study suggests that promotion focus may serve as a protective factor. This is especially important for employees working in bureaucratic environments with hierarchical constraints that limit personal control over work processes. A strong promotion focus, emphasizing personal growth and goal attainment, can help employees stay resilient and maintain high performance despite encountering negative supervisory behaviors. This underscores the importance of fostering a culture where employees are encouraged to develop their skills and focus on long-term personal and professional goals, contributing to both individual and organizational growth.

Finally, this study engages with broader ethical considerations relevant to organizational behavior. While the primary theoretical lens is self-efficacy theory, the findings bear important normative implications consistent with Kantian ethics. From a deontological standpoint, as articulated by Immanuel Kant, individuals

ought to be treated as ends in themselves rather than as instruments for others' purposes. Abusive supervision—even when not directed at the individual but observed in the treatment of peers—violates this ethical imperative by undermining the inherent dignity and moral worth of employees. The reduction in self-efficacy and task performance among third-party observers underscores the ethical urgency of fostering organizational environments that uphold respect, fairness, and human dignity. Accordingly, this research not only contributes to the psychological understanding of leadership dynamics but also reinforces the moral responsibility of organizations to ensure ethical treatment across all levels of workplace interaction.

Managerial Implications

This study provides several key recommendations for organizations to consider in mitigating the negative impacts of vicarious abusive supervision. First, organizations must recognize that the consequences of abusive supervision can extend beyond direct victims to include third-party witnesses. Preventing abusive supervision is therefore paramount, and organizations should review and strengthen their terms of employment, ensuring that they promote fairness, respect, and a balance between protective and restrictive functions. Moreover, organizations should refine internal disciplinary procedures and establish clear channels for reporting misconduct, particularly when informal resolution between supervisors and employees fails. Ensuring fairness and accountability is vital, and these processes should be consistently upheld to protect all employees, both victims and bystanders.

Second, the effects of abusive supervision on third parties highlight the need for comprehensive support systems within organizations. As employees often face high stress and organizational pressures, emotional support mechanisms are essential. Implementing Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and fostering a supportive work environment can help mitigate the negative effects of vicarious abusive supervision. Furthermore, organizations should establish a clear, structured system for identifying, reporting, and addressing misconduct. This system should operate independently of the formal chain of command to safeguard employees from potential retaliation or bias. It must incorporate confidential reporting procedures, transparent guidelines for investigating complaints, and appropriate corrective actions. Regular training for both supervisors and employees on recognizing and reporting misconduct is essential to ensure the system's effectiveness and integrity.

Finally, our findings indicate that employees with a strong promotion focus are better equipped to handle the negative effects of abusive supervision. In organizational environments where resources are limited and structural constraints hinder personal growth, it is critical for organizations to cultivate a culture that prioritizes employee development and long-term growth. Encouraging employees to focus on skill acquisition, personal development, and long-term goals can enhance their resilience and mitigate the harmful effects of toxic work environments. Furthermore, fostering a workplace culture that treats individuals as ends in themselves, rather than means to an end, can ensure that employees' rights are respected, contributing to both their personal well-being and the overall success of the organization.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study offers valuable insights, it has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce biases, such as social desirability or underreporting of negative behaviors. To mitigate these biases, future research could incorporate more objective measures, such as third-party evaluations or behavioral observations. Additionally, longitudinal

designs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sustained effects of abusive supervision on third parties within organizational contexts. The use of qualitative methods, such as interviews and field observations, could also offer deeper insights into the specific contexts and dynamics of vicarious abusive supervision.

Second, this study focused on general impressions and evaluations of vicarious abusive supervision, but it is important to recognize that abusive behaviors manifest in various forms, which may differ depending on the organizational context. Future research could investigate how different types of abusive supervision, such as verbal or emotional abuse, affect third-party witnesses in various organizational settings, including healthcare, education, and corporate environments. This would enhance our understanding of how the form of abuse influences the experiences and responses of bystanders.

Finally, future research could broaden its scope by examining how organizational culture either exacerbates or mitigates the effects of vicarious abusive supervision. Understanding the role of organizational norms, leadership styles, and institutional support mechanisms in shaping employees' responses to abusive behavior could provide practical insights for improving work environments and enhancing employee well-being in unethical leadership contexts.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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