

Abusive Supervision: A Systematic Review and New Research Approaches

Source: frontiers | **Author:** Ivonne Gallegos, Rita Berger, Joan Guardia-Olmos | **Published:** January 06, 2022 | **PMS Relevance:** PMS RELATED | **Type:** Meta-Analysis/Review | **Geography:** Global

Source URL: <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/communication/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2021.6>

Executive Summary

This systematic review examines a decade of empirical research on abusive supervision (AS), defined as subordinates' perceptions of supervisors engaging in sustained hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Authored by Gallegos, Guàrdia-Olmos, and Berger (2022), the article argues that existing AS research is theoretically narrow, methodologically insufficient, and neglects both the supervisor's perspective and employee recovery processes. Following PRISMA guidelines, the authors analyzed 171 empirical manuscripts comprising 239 samples published between 2010 and July 2020, sourced via Web of Science. Key findings reveal that AS research has grown substantially between 2018 and 2020, with 101 distinct theories identified, predominantly social-relational and affective frameworks. Four mechanism types were classified: simple relations, moderators, mediators, and combined models. The review identifies persistent reliance on cross-sectional, single-source, individual-level designs as a core methodological limitation. The authors conclude that theoretical expansion toward emotional process theories and recovery constructs, combined with longitudinal, diary-based, and multilevel methodologies, represents the primary direction for future AS research.

Key Insights

1. AS research grew substantially between 2018 and 2020, with 48% of total reviewed studies published during that period, but the field remains concentrated at the individual employee level with little attention to supervisor self-perception or team-level dynamics.
2. The dominant theoretical frameworks — Social Exchange Theory, Social Learning Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Affective Events Theory — treat emotions as static outcomes, failing to capture the dynamic, cyclical nature of abusive supervision as a process.
3. Recovery from abusive supervision is a near-absent construct in the literature: only two studies included variables examining how subordinates might recover from abuse, representing a significant empirical gap.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations measuring the impact of leadership behavior on employee well-being may find that cross-sectional, single-source survey designs systematically underestimate or misrepresent the relational dynamics of abusive supervision, as the review documents widespread common method variance in existing studies.
- Existing AS research provides limited evidence on how abusive supervision affects entire teams or how supervisors themselves perceive their own abusive behavior, suggesting that multi-source,

multilevel data collection approaches capture a more complete picture of workplace dynamics than individual self-reports alone.

Frameworks Mentioned

Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) — A stress theory proposing that individuals are motivated to obtain, retain, and protect resources; applied in AS research to explain how abusive leadership depletes followers' personal resources, increasing distress and strain.

Affective Events Theory (AET) — A theoretical framework by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) proposing that workplace events trigger affective reactions that influence attitudes and behaviors; used in AS research to examine differential emotional responses to abusive supervisory behavior.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) — A sociological framework explaining interactions as exchanges governed by norms of reciprocity; applied in AS research to analyze supervisor-subordinate relational dynamics.

Social Learning Theory (SLT) — Bandura's (1977) theory proposing that behavior is learned through observation and modeling; used in AS research to explain how aggressive supervisory behavior may be emulated or transmitted organizationally.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The review applies PRISMA guidelines with a high inter-rater reliability score (Fleiss' kappa = 0.98), covers a substantial corpus of 171 articles and 239 samples, and provides a structured taxonomy of mechanisms and theoretical frameworks. The identification of recovery as a near-absent construct is a genuine and original contribution. Limitations: The review is restricted to Web of Science, excluding conference papers, unpublished studies, and other databases, which may introduce publication bias. The scope is limited to AS and does not encompass related destructive leadership constructs. The proposed theoretical expansions — particularly toward emotional process theory and recovery frameworks — are prescriptive in nature and not empirically validated within this review itself. The review does not conduct quantitative meta-analysis, limiting its ability to synthesize effect sizes or causal claims. The framing under 'transactional psychological well-being' is asserted as a theoretical lens but is not systematically operationalized across all coded studies, potentially introducing interpretive inconsistency.

Organizational Practice

The article documents organizational practices associated with abusive supervision across multiple industries and cultural contexts, including supervisor hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors toward subordinates, absenteeism, employee turnover, counterproductive work behaviors, and reduced performance. It also documents the prevalence of single-source, self-reported employee survey designs as the dominant data collection practice in organizational research on this topic. The estimated annual cost of abusive supervision to U.S. employers was cited at \$23.8 billion, attributed to absenteeism and legal expenses.

Strategic Implications

The near-complete absence of recovery-oriented constructs and supervisor self-perception data in the AS literature implies that organizational diagnostics relying on existing research frameworks may systematically overlook cyclical and escalating abuse dynamics at the team and supervisory levels. The

documented shift from social-relational to affective theoretical frameworks between 2010 and 2020 suggests an emerging research trajectory toward emotion-granular and process-based models of leadership harm, which may influence how future PMS tools conceptualize leadership quality indicators. The predominance of cross-sectional individual-level studies also implies that current empirical evidence on the causal mechanisms linking abusive supervision to organizational outcomes remains structurally limited.

Validation Status: passed

Generated by Peoplense (peoplense.com) on 2026-08-18 23:41 UTC