

Impact of Subordinate Role Overload on Abusive Supervision: Mediating role of Supervisors' Emotional ExhaustionMr. Nasir Ali^{a*}, Dr. Qaiser Mehmood^a, Mr. Shaukat Ayaz^a^a Iqra National University Peshawar, Pakistan**Abstract**

Building on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study examines the impact of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision, focusing on the mediating role of supervisors' emotional exhaustion. The research implies that abusive behavior by supervisors may in fact be a second order result of excessive role demand on subordinates. Specifically, subordinate role overload is hypothesized to deplete supervisors' emotional resources, resulting in heightened emotional exhaustion, which may trigger abusive supervision as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Data of public sector health organizations in Pakistan are used to study the proposed relationships, and a cross sectional design is used to analyze the proposed relationships. Results reveal a significant indirect effect, underscoring the pivotal role of supervisors' emotional exhaustion in translating subordinate role overload into abusive supervisory behaviors. These findings contribute to understanding the relational dynamics within organizations, highlighting the importance of addressing subordinate role overload and supporting supervisors' emotional well-being to mitigate abusive supervision. Finally possible applications and implications to organizational policies, leadership training, and future areas of research are discussed.

Keywords: Subordinate Role Overload, Abusive Supervision, Supervisor Emotional Exhaustion

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1. Introduction

Abusive supervision is a critical organizational issue that negatively impacts both employee well-being and organizational effectiveness (Dhali et al., 2023). Defined as the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behavior by supervisors toward subordinates, excluding physical contact (Fischer et al., 2021), abusive supervision has been linked to adverse outcomes, including decreased employee job satisfaction (Mathieu & Babiak, 2015), increased turnover intentions (Tepper et al., 2009), and heightened mental health issues (Tepper et al., 2017). These consequences significantly hinder organizational productivity, with estimates showing that abusive supervision affects up to 13.6% of U.S. employees, leading to organizational costs as high as 200% of an employee's annual salary due to turnover (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Psychological consequences for employees, such as emotional exhaustion, further exacerbate the problem, with studies showing an increase of up to 21% in emotional exhaustion due to abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2008).

While most of the literature has focused on the antecedents of abusive supervision, the majority of studies emphasize supervisor-related factors such as high job demands, lack of resources, and personal stressors, including work-life imbalance and family conflicts (Saleem et al., 2024; Arnold, 2017). These stressors use supervisors' resource and then redirect them in a maladaptive coping response (abuse of subordinates) a la (Yagil et al., 2011). Additionally, organizational factors like insufficient social support further amplify supervisors' emotional exhaustion, increasing the likelihood of abusive supervision (Inceoglu et al., 2018). Having said this, work has recently been in place to explore the bidirectional dynamics of supervisor subordinate relationships that go against the notion that subordinates passively consume supervisor actions (Lee et al. 2020). As an example, some subordinate behaviours (e.g. counterproductive work habits, not following organisational norms) performed by subordinate may also pressure his/ her relationship with their supervisor and result in a hostile supervisory action (Eissa et al., 2020). Additionally, the subordinate related stressors such as role overload and personal challenges which cause subordinate abuse also contribute to supervisors' emotional exhaustion (Kim & Beehr, 2023). This evolving perspective underscores the active role of subordinates in shaping supervisory behaviors, suggesting that subordinate circumstances are a crucial but underexplored aspect of the abusive supervision phenomenon. This dynamic can be explained very well by Conservation of Resources (Hobfoll, 1989) theory. In COR theory, people engage in attempts to acquire, protect, and conserve relatively valuable resources (e.g., time, energy, emotional well being, etc.). These resources are threatened or depleted, and this conjures up stress that drives people to sacrifice adaptive behaviours in order to avoid the further loss of resources (Khan et al., 2023). This framework was then used to show that subordinates who are role overloaded will place higher demands on their supervisors and that these demands will drain the emotional and cognitive resources of their supervisors. Depletion of resources may be met with abuse of remaining resources as a means of resource conservation.

This study extends existing research by focusing on the role of subordinate conditions, particularly role overload, in triggering abusive supervision through the mediating effect of supervisors' emotional exhaustion. By highlighting the active contribution of

subordinates to the development of abusive supervision, this study seeks to address critical gaps in the literature and advance the understanding of the complex dynamics underlying supervisory behavior.

The Present Study

Role overload as one of the most crucial topics of organizational psychology has recently gained much attention and its influence on supervisory relations, and work relationship (Bakker et al., 2014). Subordinate role overload refers to a situation where employees perceive that their responsibilities exceed their capacity, leading to feelings of strain and diminished well-being (Kahn et al., 1964). This condition also holds true for subordinates and has tremendous implications for the supervisor subordinate relationships (Ismail et al., 2012). Supervisors of the overburdened workforce also have other issues and challenges in terms of task delays, mistakes and low morale that can indeed worsen stress among employees (Kelly and Moen, 2021). Because of this, supervisors might resort to abusive behavior to respond to these pressures as an unproductive (or coping) mechanism (Tepper et al., 2017). Abusive supervision, described as the display of sustained hostile verbal or non-verbal behaviors toward subordinates, has been widely studied for its adverse impact on employee well-being and organizational outcomes (Tepper, 2000; Fischer et al., 2021). However, the antecedents and mediating mechanisms that lead to abusive supervision, especially those related to subordinate conditions like role overload, remain underexplored.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory by Hobfoll (1989), provides a theoretical lens to understand how subordinate role overload may result in abusive supervision through the mediating role of supervisors' emotional exhaustion. The COR theory states that people have an objective to acquire, maintain, and defend resources, e.g. emotional and cognitive energy (Hobfoll and Freedy, 2017). Stressors like excessive demands can use up such resources which people defend what is left through defensive behaviors (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This means that subordinates with role overload will be using extra time and attention from supervisors, using their emotional and cognitive resources, when applied. This resource depletion can lead to emotionally exhausted supervisors (Maslach and Jackson, 1981), feeling emotionally drained, and are not able to cope effectively. In turn, emotionally exhausted supervisors may resort to abusive supervision as a way to minimize further resource loss.

While prior research has extensively examined the direct antecedents of abusive supervision, such as supervisor personality traits, work stressors, and organizational culture (Tepper, 2007; Inceoglu et al., 2018), less attention has been given to subordinate-driven factors. Furthermore, the mediating role of supervisor emotional exhaustion in the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision has not been thoroughly investigated. Liu et al. (2015) suggested that supervisor emotional exhaustion plays a pivotal role in shaping supervisory behaviors, but empirical studies exploring this mechanism in the context of subordinate role overload are scarce.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the indirect effect of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision through supervisor emotional exhaustion. The research integrates COR theory, emphasizing that resource dynamics in supervisory relationships contribute to workplace stress and that workplace stressors are reciprocal. In doing so, this study not only contributes to the literature

on abusive supervision but also offers practical insights for mitigating such behaviors through targeted interventions aimed at managing subordinate workloads and supporting supervisors' emotional well-being.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Subordinate Role Overload and Abusive Supervision

This study investigates the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision, focusing on how the excessive demands placed on subordinates contribute to supervisors displaying abusive behaviors. Employees experiencing role overload are under the impression that they are asked to do too much, causing stress and ill being (Kahn et al., 1964; Bakker et al., 2014). Role overload affects mainly subordinates, but the implication is that supervisors need to manage these overburdened employees. Abusive supervision, defined as the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors by supervisors toward subordinates, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000), is known to arise more frequently in high-stress environments (Tepper et al., 2017).

The COR theory by Hobfoll (1989), provides a useful framework to understand the link between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision. According to COR theory, people strive for, strive to keep, strive to protect valuable resources (e.g. time, energy, emotional stability). Subordinators may need additional guidance or assistance from their supervisors when subordinates are struggling with role overload, and in this way offload additional demands on their supervisors' time and energy. This higher demand can drain your supervisor's resources which makes them frustrated and emotionally drained. This leads supervisors to use abusive behaviors as a maladaptive means to preserve what remaining resources they have or to reduce perceived resource loss.

The empirical evidence suggests that subordinate stressors can spill over and affect supervisor behavior. For instance, Liu et al. (2015) found that supervisors managing stressed or disengaged employees are more likely to exhibit negative behaviors, including abusive supervision. Similarly, research by Zhang et al. (2022) highlights that subordinates' excessive demands can heighten supervisors' emotional exhaustion, a key predictor of abusive behaviors. However, while the direct association between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision has been acknowledged in previous studies (Tepper, 2007), there remains a limited understanding of the underlying mechanisms that drive this relationship.

Building on these insights, this study posits that subordinate role overload creates additional stressors for supervisors, ultimately resulting in abusive supervision as supervisors struggle to cope with the increased demands. We propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Subordinate role overload is positively related to abusive supervision.

The Mediating Role of Supervisor Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion from supervisors refers to a situation characterized by emotional over extension and having drained emotional resources as a result of continued exposure to stressors (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Korkmazurek and Ocak, 2024). Drawing on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this study posits that supervisor emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision. In COR theory, individuals are motivated to acquire, maintain, and protect resources susceptible to loss unless defended; when they are lost or depleted, the

individuals experience a stress (COR) and may engage in (even unhealthy) defensive behaviors to conserve that which is left.

If subordinates suffer from role overload and cannot meet excessive job demands, they spill over to their supervisors in terms of increased dependency and additional requirements for guidance or help. The impact is that having to deal with this dynamic puts supervisors at a higher risk of emotional exhaustion draining and taking out their emotional and cognitive resources. However, continuous exposure to subordinates with role overload depletes supervisory emotional resources, making them less able to maintain constructive interpersonal interactions (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004).

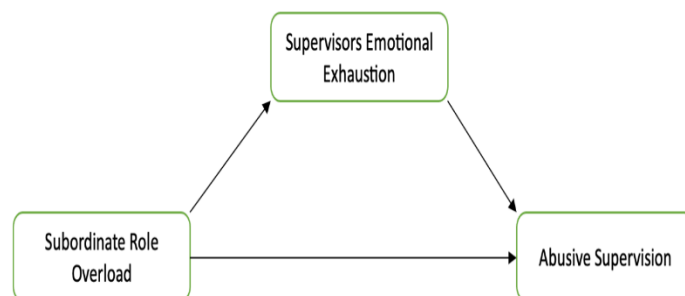
Emotional exhaustion interferes with a manager's capacity to control emotion and conduct positive leadership actions like those, and he or she may express frustration and hostility against subordinates (Tepper et al., 2017). In line with COR theory, emotionally exhausted supervisors may use abusive behaviors as a maladaptive method of coping with resource deficit, such as conserving resources as a form of effort minimization or reducing the perception of environmental stressors (Hobfoll, 1989). However, empirical evidence is in support of this relationship; studies have found that emotionally exhausted supervisors are more likely to act aggressively towards their subordinates (Malik et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022).

Thus, supervisor emotional exhaustion serves as a crucial explanatory mechanism linking subordinate role overload to abusive supervision. Supervisors, unable to adequately manage the emotional strain caused by subordinate role overload, are likely to become emotionally exhausted, which in turn increases the likelihood of abusive supervision.

H2: Supervisor emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision.

By examining this mediation process, the current study advances our understanding of the mechanisms through which subordinate role overload leads to abusive supervision and underscores the pivotal role of supervisor emotional exhaustion in this dynamic.

Figure 1: Mediation model of the study



2. Method.

2.1 Sample and Procedure

This study used data collected from public sector health organizations in Islamabad, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Mardan and Abbottabad, in Pakistan. Nurses and their immediate supervisors from different healthcare departments were the subject population. To provide a rich context to study the interplay between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision, this context was chosen

because it involves the high pressure dynamics that exist in healthcare settings.

To ensure the representation of a broad range of departments within these organizations, a stratified random sampling was utilized. Before data collection, management approval was obtained and 900 questionnaires distributed to subordinates and their immediate superiors. We returned a total of 576 questionnaires, yielding a response rate of about 64%. After removing incomplete responses through listwise deletion, 481 valid responses were retained—401 from subordinates (89% female; age range 22–55 years, $M = 31.2$, $SD = 6.7$) and 80 from supervisors. Subordinates reported an average job experience of 5.3 years ($SD = 4.9$), with 1.8 years ($SD = 1.3$) of tenure under their current supervisor.

The study adopted a cross-sectional, time-lagged design to reduce common method bias and enhance data quality. Data were collected at three intervals with a two-week gap between each. Subordinate role overload (subordinate-rated) was assessed in the first wave, supervisor emotional exhaustion (supervisor-rated) in the second wave, and abusive supervision (subordinate-rated) in the third wave. All responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality and encourage honest reporting.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Subordinate Role Overload. Role overload in a subordinate role was measured using a three item scale developed by Bolino and Turnley (2005) (e.g., “I have too much work to do it all well”). Using a 5-point Likert scale measuring (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree, participants responded. Cronbach’s alpha was high for the scale, at 0.912.

2.2.2 Supervisor Emotional Exhaustion. The nine item scale by Maslach and Jackson (1981) (e.g., “I feel emotionally drained from my work”) was used to assess supervisor emotional exhaustion. The reaction sample are supervisors who completed a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) assessing how exhausted that they were emotionally. Excellent reliability was afforded by the scale with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.958.

2.2.3 Abusive Supervision. The 15-item scale developed by Tepper (2000) was used to measure abusive supervision (e.g., “My supervisor ridicules me”). Subordinates responded on a 5 point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale demonstrated very good internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha of 0.980.

The use of validated scales with high internal consistency underscores the robustness of the measurement approach adopted in this study.

3. Results

Hypothesis 1 proposed that subordinate role overload is positively related to abusive supervision. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a simple regression analysis using the PROCESS macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2022), with subordinate role overload as the independent variable and abusive supervision as the dependent variable.

The results revealed a significant positive total effect of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision ($\beta = 0.2687$, $t = 5.1783$, $p < 0.001$). The standardized coefficient was 0.2310, indicating that an increase in subordinate role overload is associated with an increase in abusive supervision. The direct effect of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision also remained significant ($\beta = 0.2256$, $t = 4.0905$, $p < 0.001$), with a standardized coefficient of 0.1943. These findings provide strong support for Hypothesis 1, confirming that subordinates experiencing higher levels

of role overload are more likely to perceive their supervisors as abusive.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that supervisor emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision. To test this mediation effect, we utilized Model 4 in the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) to examine the indirect effect of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision through supervisor emotional exhaustion.

The first stage of the mediation analysis revealed that subordinate role overload was significantly related to supervisor emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.1875$, $t = 3.9051$, $p < 0.001$). The standardized coefficient of 0.1714 indicates that higher levels of subordinate role overload are linked with increased emotional exhaustion in supervisors. The second stage of the analysis showed that supervisor emotional exhaustion was significantly related to abusive supervision ($\beta = 0.2023$, $t = 4.0265$, $p < 0.001$), with a standardized coefficient of 0.1845, suggesting that supervisors experiencing higher levels of emotional exhaustion are more likely to engage in abusive supervisory behaviors.

The mediation analysis confirmed that the indirect effect of subordinate role overload on abusive supervision through supervisor emotional exhaustion was significant (indirect effect = 0.0379, $SE = 0.0150$, 95% CI [0.0102, 0.0657]). The completely standardized indirect effect was 0.0325, further suggesting a small but significant mediation effect. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 2, indicating that subordinate role overload indirectly influences abusive supervision through its impact on supervisor emotional exhaustion.

The results provide robust evidence for both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. Subordinate role overload is positively associated with abusive supervision, and this relationship is partially mediated by supervisor emotional exhaustion. Based on these findings, it seems that high levels of role overload of subordinates cause increased emotional exhaustion in supervisors, which in turn results in abusive supervisory behavior.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision, focusing on the role of supervisor emotional exhaustion as a mediator in this relationship. The results provide substantial evidence for both the direct and indirect effects, contributing to our understanding of the mechanisms through which role overload impacts abusive supervision.

The first hypothesis, which proposed a positive relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision, was strongly supported by the data. The results indicated that the subordinate who was working under the overloaded roles perceived his or her supervisor as abusive. This finding is consistent with the research findings that other stressors such as role overload lead to negative employee and supervisor consequences (Tepper, 2007; Zhang et al., 2015). The increase in role overload can create an environment of heightened stress and frustration, which may lead supervisors to respond in harmful ways, such as through abusive supervision (Tariq et al., 2023). This study adds to the growing literature by empirically connecting one of the most common workplace stressors—role overload—to abusive supervisory behaviors.

Table 1
Showing the direct, indirect and total effect of subordinate role overload, supervisor emotional exhaustion and abusive Supervision

Model	Path	Effect (Coeff)	SE	t	p-value	LLCI	ULCI	Standardized Coeff.
1. Indirect Effect Model (SEE as DV)	SRO → SEE	0.1875	0.0480	3.9051	<0.001	0.0935	0.2815	0.1714
2. Direct Effect Model (AS as DV)	SRO → AS	0.2256	0.0551	4.0905	<0.001	0.1176	0.3336	0.1943
	SEE → AS	0.2023	0.0502	4.0265	<0.001	0.1037	0.3009	0.1845
3. Total Effect Model (AS as DV)	SRO → AS	0.2687	0.0519	5.1783	<0.001	0.1669	0.3705	0.2310
Indirect Effect of SRO on AS through SEE	SRO → SEE → AS	0.0379	0.0150	-	-	0.0102	0.0657	0.0325

The second hypothesis, which suggested that supervisor emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision, was also supported. Our results revealed that subordinate role overload is significantly associated with increased supervisor emotional exhaustion, which in turn leads to abusive supervisory behaviors. The finding is consistent with the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which states that individuals that experience stressors (e.g., subordinates with high role overload) expend emotional resources. The emotional exhaustion that follows this depletion can undermine a supervisor's ability to effectively manage and support their subordinates, often leading to negative outcomes, such as abusive supervision (Lam et al., 2017).

Maliks (2023) and Teppers (2017) previous study found that emotionally exhausted supervisors tend to be verbally abusive and aggressive in an attempt to reduce their stress, which was consistent with these findings. Our study extends this understanding by highlighting the specific role of subordinate role overload in exacerbating supervisor emotional exhaustion, further solidifying the importance of managing workload-related stressors to prevent adverse supervisory behaviors.

Practical Implications

The implications of this study are also relevant to practice and policy in organizations to enhance organizational commitment and engagement. First, the positive relationship between subordinate role overload and abusive supervision suggests that organizations should pay closer attention to the workload and role demands placed on employees. Reducing role overload through effective workload management, role clarification, and providing adequate resources can potentially mitigate the negative effects that lead to abusive supervision. Managers should learn not only how to manage their own emotional resources but also to recognize and deal with emergent role overloads for their subordinate to prevent burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, the role of supervisor emotional exhaustion as a mediator suggests the value of fostering the creation of adequate resources to manage these 'emotional' aspects of work in supervisors. Supervisors are also a subject of emotional exhaustion at the workplace, so supervisors might benefit from the following measures: the implementation of the emotional intelligence training, the stress management programme, or breaks to help supervisors to address their emotional exhaustion. Organizations can prevent role overload from

becoming abusive supervisory behaviors by promoting an environment at work that supports emotional well being.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Studies

While this study contributes valuable insights into the dynamics between subordinate role overload, supervisor emotional exhaustion, and abusive supervision, there are several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Second, the present study is a cross-sectional study and, thus, makes it difficult to establish causality. Determining a better temporal association of these variables would be useful, and for that reason, a longitudinal design would be adequate. However, since this study was conducted in public sector health organizations in Pakistan, the findings of this study could be generalized in other sectors or cultures. Exploring the role of other variables, such as subordinate emotional exhaustion or supervisor personality traits, could also offer a more thorough understanding of the factors that contribute to abusive supervision. Additionally, future research might further investigate other potential mediators or moderators (e.g. supervisor coping strategies or subordinate resilience) that may play a moderating role with supervisor emotional exhaustion, on this relationship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides compelling evidence that subordinate role overload is positively associated with abusive supervision, with supervisor emotional exhaustion serving as a significant mediator in this relationship. These findings emphasize the importance of managing role overload and supporting supervisors' emotional well-being to prevent the emergence of abusive supervisory behaviors. By addressing the root causes of role overload and emotional exhaustion, organizations can improve the well-being of both employees and supervisors, fostering healthier and more productive work environments.

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