



## A Study on the Influence of Abusive Supervision on the Silence Behavior

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### Abstract

This study established a model with abuse management as an independent variable, emotional exhaustion as a mediating variable and silent behavior as a mediator variable. A total of 368 valid questionnaires were collected. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of abuse management was 0.84, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of silent behavior was 0.78, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of emotional exhaustion was 0.89, and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of each variable was higher than 0.7, indicating that the scale used in this study had consistency and high reliability. Through statistical analysis and regression analysis, the results showed that the perception of leaders' abusive management was still very high, and the leaders' abusive management was at a higher level, at the same time, the emotional exhaustion and silence of employees are at a middle level. Leadership abuse management has a significant positive impact on employee's silent behavior; emotional exhaustion has a significant positive impact on employee's silent behavior; emotional exhaustion plays a mediator role in the relationship between abusive management and employee's silent behavior.

**Keywords:** *Abusive Supervision; Silent Behavior; Emotional Exhaustion*

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### 1. Introduction

Technology and information technology are everywhere, and now a lot of negative news is published in the world, such as sexual harassment, abuse and disposal in the workplace. Wang's survey (2017) found that 5%-10% of employees are being bullied by leaders every moment. Baig, Tanzil, Shaikh, Hashmi, Khan, and Polkowski (2018) found in a US survey that one in seven employees reported serious management misconduct by direct managers and that 50 percent of employees had suffered a major career attack. Tepper and Park (2017) found that 13.6 percent of U.S. employees were insulted by management, and U.S. companies were losing heavily every year, and that number was rising year by year.

As we all know, the language of managers is an extremely important factor in the language of employees. It is a good choice to study the silent behavior of employees and start with the behavior of managers. Also, learn about economic development, civilization in progress, at a time when less and less violence management behavior occurs, but the workplace "cold violence" (abuse management) quietly exists. According to the 2015 People's Network survey, 75.9% of people in the workplace are exposed to abusive management of such workplace cold violence. Of these, 38.1% of people were severely affected in their work; 20.9% of people opted for cold violence, such as employee silence; and only 16.9% of people opted to respond positively to the situation. Therefore, it is necessary to study the influence of employee silent behavior and influence mechanism on reminding and advising managers from the perspective of abusive management.

Medical personnel are an important group of medical and health undertakings. Society is changing every day, people's living standards are also rising, clinical medicine is developing rapidly, and the requirements for medical care are also high. In order to meet the needs of the society, the nursing team needs to be stable, the quality of nursing service needs to be improved, and the nursing technology should be continuously updated and improved (Li et al, 2003). At present, there is a high turnover rate in the health care group, which leads to the shortage of human resources, while there are general negative emotions such as job burnout and job meaninglessness in nurses on the job, which is not conducive to the improvement of medical quality and the development and innovation of discipline (Wu & Yan, 2017). The silent behavior of on-the-job medical staff is also an important factor hindering the improvement of nursing team and discipline. The silence of medical knowledge means that it is not really involved in the team, which is not

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conducive to the discovery and solution of problems in the organization, and hinders the innovation and reform of the discipline. For health care workers, silence leads to psychological problems and turnover intentions reduce job performance (Yang et al, 2017). Silence not only affects organizational decision-making ability, but also has a great negative impact on employees. To avoid the adverse effects of silence and create an atmosphere that encourages the expression of different views, the most important point is to find the reasons for the silence of health care workers. Does abusive management affect employee silence through other psychological mechanisms? There are few researches on the internal psychological mechanism of the two. Employee emotional exhaustion causes the organization to form job burnout and affects their turnover tendency, which has a certain effect on employee silence (Hu et al, 2017). Employees are negatively affected by abusive management, and their negative emotions will also increase, which may have a greater impact on employee silent behavior (Dong, 2016). Therefore, the role of emotional exhaustion in abusive management and employee silent behavior is also the focus of this study.

Abuse management is derived from the concept of "destructive leadership". For the definition of abuse management, it is the expression of Tepper (2000) that is generally accepted by the academic circles at present. He defines abusive management as the perceived superior's persistent aggression (excluding physical contact). The main performance: In the workplace to treat employees in a hostile manner, such as a breach of commitments to subordinates, rude action, being forced, disregard for subordinates and so on. This concept suggests that abusive management has three characteristics: subjectivity, persistence, and hostility. That is to say, abuse management is the subjective perception of subordinates, a continuous behavior of superiors, and this behavior has a hostile nature.

As the implementer of abusive management behavior, the supervisor's personal quality, education level, moral tendency, leadership style and so on will determine whether it will produce abusive management behavior. First of all, the personal experience of the supervisor affects his management behavior. In many studies, managers are found to be more likely to abuse their subordinates after experiencing employee conflicts (Greenbaum et al, 2017). Pradhan and Jena (2018), examining the relationship between employee cultural values and abusive management, found that employees with high power distance or traditional cultural values were more inclined to regard abusive management as superior authority performance, normal behavior, low power distance or non-traditional cultural values employees, pursuing equality and fairness, and they could feel a higher level of abusive management.

The concept of employee silent behavior comes from organizational silent behavior. Morrison and Milliken (2000) put forward the concept of silence from the organizational point of view, silence exists as a group phenomenon in the organization, which is manifested in the general silence taken by the people in the organization to improve the organization's situation. According to the above research, the employee silent behavior can be summed up as three points: first, the employee silence is conscious (Dyne et al, 2003); second, the employee silence premise is that the employee realizes that there is a problem in the organization and forms his own view (Pinder & Harlos, 2001); third, the employee silence must be produced for some reason (Zheng et al, 2008).

The traditional culture of China makes it common for organizations to be superior and inferior. In most cases, decision-making is a matter for managers, while subordinates are only the executors of decision-making (Offermann & Hellmann, 1996). The study by Su et al. (2017) found that the culture of power gap has a great influence on the behavior of employees' remonstrating. Gao (2016) studied the staff in the Chinese background: found that the Chinese people will consider because of human feelings and face, and other people need to establish a good relationship, and harmony, so it is more likely to appear employee silent behavior. The study by Vakola and Bouradas (2013) also points to the fact that managers in an organization often show disregard for or denial of their employees' opinions, which can significantly increase their tendency to be silent. In contrast, transformational leadership can make employees happy to escape silence.

Job burnout refers to the state of physical and mental fatigue and exhaustion produced by the individual under the stress of work. Proposed by Freudenberger (1974), who argued that job burnout was a symptom of the most likely emotional exhaustion in the helping industry. Subsequently, this concept has

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attracted extensive attention of scholars, through the study of service personnel, Maslach (1981) called the psychological syndrome caused by responding to long-term emotional and interpersonal stressors at work as job burnout, and the original framework structure of job burnout is proposed. According to Maslach (1981), job burnout consists of three parts, namely, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal accomplishment. The definition of job burnout was adopted by most studies, but a growing number of studies have found that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal achievement have different importance. Empirical studies have shown that emotional exhaustion is central to job burnout (Koeske et al, 1989a; Zhou, 2010; Shirom, 1989). Freudenberger (1974) argued that emotional exhaustion refers to the state of emotional exhaustion and exhaustion due to accumulated stress in the individual or work life. Emotional exhaustion is one sign of burnout.

Maslach and Jackson (1984) further pointed out that emotional exhaustion was a feeling of over-stress and depletion of emotional resources as a result of work. Wright and Cronpanzano (1998) argued that emotional exhaustion was chronic physical fatigue and mental exhaustion resulting from excessive work burdens and difficulties at work. Demerouti et al. (2001) considered that emotional exhaustion was a stress-induced worker's work response, and elaborated on the mechanism of generating emotional exhaustion from two sources of stress, presenting the theory of job demand resource model (JDR), which is nothing more than two aspects of job requirements and resources for different job burnouts. The severe demands of the job bring continuous pressure and burdens to the individual, which leads to the persistent fatigue of the individual, on the other hand, the lack of work resources, makes it more difficult to achieve the requirements of the job, and leads to the emotional exhaustion of the staff and the withdrawal of the work.

## 2. Objectives

At present, some achievements have been made in the study of abusive management outside China, but some important issues have not been paid enough attention to. Specifically:

Previous studies on abusive management focused on the effects of abusive management on employee performance, employee attitudes such as turnover tendency, job satisfaction, organizational commitment or employee behavior such as workplace deviant behavior, organizational citizenship behavior, etc. However, there is still a lack of empirical research on the mechanism of abusive management on employee silence.

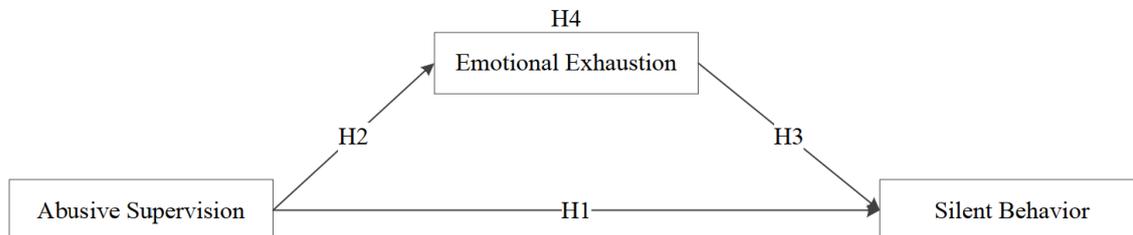
Second, will abusive management affect employee silent behavior through other psychological mechanisms? There are few researches on the internal psychological mechanism between the two. Employee emotional exhaustion makes the organization form job burnout, which affects their turnover tendency, and has a certain impact on the silent behavior of employees (Hu et al, 2017). employees are negatively affected by abusive management, and their negative emotions will also increase, which may have a greater impact on employee silent behavior (Dong, 2016). Therefore, the role of emotional exhaustion in abusive management and employee silent behavior is also the focus of this study.

Combined with the above research motivation, this study proposes the following two research purposes, which are described as follows:

Objective 1: To investigate the effects of abusive management on employee silent behavior.

Objective 2: To explore the role of emotional exhaustion in abusive management and employee silent behavior.

The SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response, S-O-R) theory in psychology holds that the body produces corresponding perception when it is stimulated by the outside world, which affects the body and makes corresponding behavior. According to the SOR theory, abusive management as an external stimulus, when applied to the individual employee, it will first have an impact on the employee's emotion, that is to produce emotional exhaustion perception; then, this perception acts on the employee's behavior to produce silence as a response to the original stimulus. Stimulation (Abuse Management) → perception (Emotional Exhaustion) → behavior (Silent Behavior). As shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Research framework

According to the emotional cognitive theory, emotion is the result of cognitive, physiological, and situational stimuli. Abuse management affects the employee's cognition and, at the same time, affects the employee's mood, and then produces a series of negative work behaviors, such as employee silence. According to the theory of social exchange, people will feel support, trust, self-esteem and so on in their communication with others, and treat others with their own attitude. So the more employees in the organization can feel the trust and friendliness of the leader to themselves, the easier it is to give their opinions and suggestions to the organization (Karatepe et al, 2018), and at this time, it is more difficult to show employee silent behavior. However, if the employee is often aware of the abusive management behavior of the supervisor, because of the lack of psychological safety, it may be considered that the behavior will be regarded as a challenge to the supervisor, so they will reduce the direct communication and interaction with the leader when they find the problem of the organization (Brees et al, 2016). To sum up, this paper proposes that H1: Abuse management has a significant positive effect on employee silent behavior.

Basit et al. (2017) argued that individual's feel emotionally depleted when they feel they lack the resources to respond to the stress they face. As a result, long-term abusive leadership employees are prone to feel drained of resources, so abusive management can affect their emotional exhaustion. The study by Tepper (2000) showed a significant relationship between abusive management and job burnout. Lam (2016) found a positive association between abusive management and emotional exhaustion, and organizational equity had a fully mediating effect in the process of abusive management affecting emotional exhaustion. Han, Harms and Bai (2017) based on a study of 600 full-time employees, found that abusive management can positively and significantly affect employee emotional exhaustion, with a correlation coefficient of up to 0.623. Tepper (2000) noted that abusive management lost leadership support and staff resources continued to wear out for a long period of time, a prerequisite for emotional exhaustion that could lead to employee emotional exhaustion. The study by Zhang (2009) in the Chinese context showed that the abusive management of leaders exacerbates the emotional exhaustion of subordinates. The leader's continuous abusive management behavior will increase the anxiety and frustration of the staff and lead to the emotional exhaustion of the staff. The study by Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter and Kacmar (2007) in the U.S. also confirmed that leader abuse management was positively associated with employee emotional exhaustion. Therefore, this paper proposes that H2: Abusive management positively affects emotional exhaustion.

Gao (2016) studied the current situation and countermeasures of corporate silence in the context of Chinese enterprises, indicating that job burnout leads to job silence, job burnout and employee silence, interpersonal fear silence, organizational system disorder silence and individual self-esteem silence. Many scholars have reported that burnout and turnover tendency have significant positive effects (Wu & Yan, 2017; He & Yu, 2017; Mullen et al, 2018). Accordingly, this study proposes that H3: emotional exhaustion has a significant positive effect on employee silent behavior.

Lam (2016) found a significant positive correlation between abusive management and emotional exhaustion, and organizational equity in abusive management which had a fully mediating effect on the process of emotional exhaustion. Han et al. (2017), based on a study of 600 full-time employees, found that abusive management can positively and significantly affect employee emotional exhaustion, with a correlation coefficient of up to 0.623. Many scholars, such as Liu et al. (2017), believe that there is a



positive correlation between employee silence and turnover tendency. A majority of scholars have shown that burnout and turnover tendency have significant positive effects. According to the above statement, it is suggested that H4: Emotional exhaustion has a significant mediating effect on employee silent behavior in abusive management.

### 3. Methodology

Measurements of abuse management in the West mainly used scales developed by Tepper (2000), including 15 measurement items, but the study of Aryee et al. (2008) found that 1 entry was significantly not applicable to the cultural context of China. Therefore, the scale developed by Aryee et al. (2008) measures the variable of abuse management, which contains 14 topics and 4 dimensions, respectively, language, attitude, ideas and behavior of abuse management. The employee silent behavior scale used by Zheng et al. (2008) divide employee silent behavior into three dimensions: tacit silence, defensive silence and indifferent silence; four items per dimension, 12 items. This paper selects the emotional exhaustion part of the job burnout questionnaire revised by Li et al. (2003), which is divided into two dimensions according to the time dimension, namely, the emotional exhaustion of working hours and the emotional exhaustion of spare time, a total of 7 entries. Using the Likert 5 rating method: 1 for total disagreement; 2 for some disagreement; 3 for neutrality; 4 for some agreement; 5 for total agreement.

### 4. Results and Discussion

The survey was carried out in December 2019, with medical staff (including doctors and nurses) in a hospital in Jinan as the research object. The hospital has 624 medical staff (including doctors and nurses only, excluding administrators, cleaners, handymen, etc.), while the total number of 624 is studied. Commissioned in the hospital as a supervisor of the family to help distribute the questionnaire, using the network questionnaire star in the hospital internal chat group, such as WeChat group, QQ group, etc., to facilitate the sampling of questionnaires, which are distribution of 400 questionnaires, recovery of 399 questionnaires, the recovery rate of 99.75%, valid questionnaire 368, and valid questionnaire rate 92.23%.

In terms of gender, there are 174 men and 194 women. In terms of age, there are 42 persons aged 18-25, 157 persons aged 26-35, 109 persons aged 36-45, 42 persons aged 46-55 and 18 persons aged 56 and above. At the educational level, there are 119 students in the tertiary level and below, 187 students in the university, 41 in the master's degree and 21 in the doctor's degree. In terms of admission to the hospital, 104 persons were admitted in less than one year, 238 in 1-10 years and 26 persons in 11 years or more.

The results of this study showed that the average value of abusive management of employees' evaluation was 3.47, which indicated that the employee's perception of abusive management of leader was moderately superior, and the leader's abusive management was at a high level, which has become a common phenomenon in the workplace. At the same time, the average of employee's emotional depletion was 3.24, which indicated that the employee under investigation would experience some exhausted state in his/her work, and felt the stress and burden of mental management, which required the attention of the organization and the leader; but on the other hand, the employee's silent behavior was 3.21, which indicated that the employee under investigation could mostly behave as moderately superior, and the manager should pay attention to the behavior of the employee.

The KMO statistic of abuse management was 0.86, meanwhile, the significant value of Bartlett's spherical degree test was less than 0.001, the total number of factors with eigenvalue greater than 1 was 4, and the total cumulative explanatory power was 78.81%. The KMO statistic of emotional exhaustion was 0.79, meanwhile, the significant value of Bartlett's spherical degree test was less than 0.001, the total number of factors with eigenvalue greater than 1 was 2, and the total cumulative explanatory power was 80.33%. The KMO statistic of employee silent behavior was 0.87, meanwhile, the significant value of Bartlett's spherical degree test was less than 0.001, the factor with eigenvalue greater than 1 was 3, and the cumulative explanatory power was 73.27%.



The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of abuse management was 0.84, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of silent behavior was 0.78, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of emotional exhaustion was 0.89, and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of each variable was higher than 0.7, indicating that the scale used in this study had consistency and high reliability.

There was a significant positive correlation between abusive management and employee silent behavior ( $r = 0.75, p < 0.05$ ), significant positive correlation between abusive management and emotional exhaustion ( $r = 0.61, p < 0.05$ ), and significant positive correlation between emotional exhaustion and employee silent behavior ( $r = 0.66, p < 0.05$ ). In accordance with the hypothesis of this study, a follow-up regression analysis was conducted to examine the causal and mediating effects between the variables.

This section attempts to explore the relationship between abusive management and emotional exhaustion on employee silent behavior. This study used SPSS for regression analysis. In this study, the stepwise test of Baron and Kenny (1986) was used to test the mediator effect. As shown in Table 1, in Model 1, the F value was 218.64 and significant, and the effect coefficient of abusive management on emotional exhaustion reached a significant level of 0.61, consistent with the hypothesis of this study that H2: Abusive management positively affects emotional exhaustion, both assuming H2 was supported. In Model 2, the F value was 289.38 and significant, and the influence coefficient of emotional exhaustion on employee silent behavior reached a significant level of 0.66. In accordance with the hypothesis of this study, H3: Emotional exhaustion had a significant positive effect on employee silent behavior. In Model 3, the F value was 459.06 and significant, and the influence coefficient of abusive management on employee silent behavior reached a significant level of 0.75. In accordance with the hypothesis of this study, H1: Abusive management had a significant positive effect on employee silent behavior. Model 4 included the mediating variable emotional exhaustion on the basis of Model 3, which showed that the F value was 305.11 and significant. By comparing the influence coefficient of Model 3 and Model 4 abusive management on employee silent behavior, the influence coefficient of abuse management on employee silent behavior was reduced from 0.75 to 0.54 in accordance with the condition 4 of Baron and Kenny (1986). It indicates that emotional exhaustion mediates between abusive management and employee silent behavior. In accordance with the hypothesis of this study, H4: Emotional exhaustion has a significant mediating effect on employee silent behavior in abusive management.

**Table 1** Regression analysis

Model	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$F$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
Model 1	Emotional Exhaustion	Abuse Management	.61	14.79	.000	218.64***	.37	.37
Model 2	Employee Silent	Emotional Exhaustion	.66	17.01	.000	289.38***	.44	.44
Model 3	Employee Silent	Abuse Management	.75	21.43	.000	459.06***	.56	.56
Model 4	Employee Silent	Abuse Management	.54	13.40	.000	305.11***	.63	.62
		Emotional Exhaustion	.33	8.22	.000			

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$

Through the above data analysis, we can find that abusive management had a significant positive effect on employee silent behavior; abusive management positively affects emotional exhaustion, and emotional exhaustion had a significant positive effect on employee silent behavior. Emotional exhaustion has a significant mediating effect on employee silent behavior in abusive management.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper uses the empirical analysis method, through the collection data carries on the quantification analysis. Through the research, this research found that in the organization, the leader's abusive management has been common, has caused the bad influence to the organization and the staff individual, which is the management practice urgent problem to be solved. The conclusion of this study shows that leaders' abusive management and subordinates' emotional exhaustion have a positive effect, and employee's emotional exhaustion has an intermediary role in the relationship between leader's abusive management and employee's silent behavior. In order to reduce the abuse management of subordinates in



the organization, reduce the emotional exhaustion of subordinates and the problem of employee silent behavior.

The perception and solution of abusive management directly influence the frequency of abusive management in the organization. Therefore, abusive management should be highly valued and concerned by senior management.

First, be able to identify what is abusive management. Many leaders don't know that their actions do more or less psychological harm to their subordinates, but in the eyes of subordinates is abusive management. Secondly, strengthen the moral cultivation of managers at all levels. The moral cultivation and values of managers directly represent the values and qualities of the organization, which is manifested in the manager's every move towards the staff. Third, create an atmosphere in the organization, which is conducive to staff advice, to prevent staff silent behavior. Fourth, enterprises should recognize the impact of negative leadership behavior on employees' emotions. Managers need to recognize the negative impact of abusive behavior on employees and their organizations. Only by recognizing that, they can improve their management mode, thereby reducing or eliminating the harm that abusive behavior brings to employees and organizations. Fifth, enterprises should investigate and understand the current situation of employees' emotional exhaustion, effectively monitor employees' emotional exhaustion strategies, so as to identify the severity of the influence of leader's abusive management on employees' emotional exhaustion, and adopt different action strategies for the different degree of influence. Sixth, enterprises should attach importance to the recruitment and training of leaders, and through various human resources management measures to curb or reduce the abuse management of leaders. Seventh, the enterprise should carry on the targeted training to the staff, enhancing its psychological resources reserve.

Standardize managers' own behavior and improve the management system. Abuse management is a common management phenomenon in enterprises and organizations, especially in many labor service intensive enterprises. The leaders themselves should realize that the abusive management behavior of employees will have a negative impact on employees and their organizations, only by recognizing, we can improve the management mode, so as to reduce or eliminate the harm caused by abusive behavior to employees and organizations. Often abusive leaders should learn more management knowledge and skills to enhance their management skills and authority, rather than relying on suppression, verbal abuse and threats to achieve their management goals.

Enterprises should pay more attention to the emotional problems of employees. With the acceleration of social rhythm and the increasingly fierce social competition, enterprises should realize that the pressure and emotional problems faced by employees are becoming more and more common and severe, and the phenomenon of emotional exhaustion exists not only in the service industry where employees interact with customers, but also in the organization. On the one hand, it is necessary to improve the organizational system, adhere to a fair and fair supervision and assessment system, formulate a series of transparent and open "anti-abuse" regulations, create a fair and just organizational atmosphere, and provide a good organizational and working environment for employees; on the other hand, enterprises should set up ways for employees to be able to appeal, such as setting up special departments and staff to receive complaints from "abused employees" and fully guarantee the legitimate interests of employees in their work.

In this study, leaders' abusive management and employee's emotional exhaustion were discussed, but there were some limitations.

First of all, limited by time, funds and so on, this study only selected the mechanism of abuse management and emotional exhaustion on employee silent behavior, failed to study some other variables that may play intermediary effect and regulatory effect. The future study should explore the role of other variables (leadership exchange, psychological capital, personality traits, etc.) in guiding the relationship between abuse management and employee silent in order to comprehensively and deeply explore the impact of leadership abuse management on employee silent behavior.

Secondly, the use of employee self-assessment method to collect data may have a certain impact on the accuracy of the data, especially subject to subjective factors, so that future research can take the form



of other evaluation on the evaluation of leader abuse management, which is reported by colleagues under the same leadership.

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