

Are you morally included? The mediating effect of subordinates' task performance and organizational citizenship behavior between political skill and abusive supervision

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate whether and how subordinates' political skill influences abusive supervision via task performance and organization-directed organizational citizenship behavior (OCB-O).

Design/methodology/approach – A 3-wave survey of 224 employees was conducted at a Chinese transportation firm and the hypotheses were tested with multi-level Bayesian structural equation modeling in Mplus.

Findings – The findings reveal that individual political skill is not directly associated with abusive supervision but indirectly relates to abusive supervision through increased OCB-O. The mediating effect of task performance is not significant.

Originality/value – This study examined the direct relationship between political skill and abusive supervision, and using moral exclusion theory, explored the unique underlying mechanisms involved, i.e. through the performance outcomes of task performance and OCB-O. While subordinates' performance is typically considered as an outcome of abusive supervision, this study positions it as a key mediator linking political skill to abusive supervision.

Keywords Abusive supervision, Political skill, Organizational citizenship behavior, Task performance, Moral exclusion

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Abusive supervision is defined as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Despite extensive research on abusive supervision, a critical challenge remains: How can such harmful supervisory behavior be restrained in practice (Fischer *et al.*, 2021; Tepper *et al.*, 2017)? The present study addresses this question by focusing on political skill as a neglected but theoretically important subordinate-related antecedent of abusive supervision. Political skill refers to individuals’ ability to understand others at work and use such knowledge to influence others in ways that facilitate personal and organizational objectives (Ferris *et al.*, 2005). Given that abusive supervision is embedded in ongoing supervisor–subordinate interactions, politically skilled subordinates could be better able to read supervisors’ expectations, manage social interactions and thereby reduce their susceptibility to abusive supervision.

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There has already been a proliferation of research on the antecedents of abusive supervision. [Zhang and Bednall \(2016\)](#) categorize these antecedents into four domains: supervisor-related, organization-related, subordinate-related and demographic factors. Existing studies have primarily focused on supervisor- and organization-related antecedents, such as supervisors' stress or low levels of procedural justice (see [Zhang and Bednall, 2016](#), for a review). This line of research largely aims to restrain the playing space for supervisors to engage in abusive behaviors. However, to effectively eradicate abusive supervision, it might be myopic to merely concentrate on the perpetrators, because this phenomenon inherently involves both supervisors and subordinates as central actors ([Tepper, 2000](#)). Likewise, it remains insufficiently understood as to why some subordinates receive more supervisory abusive behaviors than others.

The concept of political skill is of critical significance to understand this question and may provide valuable insights into perceptions of abusive supervision more generally. Prior research on subordinate-related antecedents has often emphasized relatively stable or innate characteristics, such as personality traits, that may make employees appear to be "easy targets" for abusive supervision ([Harvey et al., 2014](#); [Lian et al., 2014](#)). Although valuable, the nature of these dispositions is relatively inherent and deep-seated, thus somewhat constraining the development of practical solutions. By contrast, political skill represents a more malleable social capability that enables employees to navigate workplace relationships more effectively ([Ferris et al., 2005](#); [Munyon et al., 2015](#)). Since leader-member interaction is an inevitable social process in organizations ([Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995](#)), political skill should be especially relevant to abusive supervision: politically skilled employees could better understand supervisors' preferences, present their contributions effectively and avoid unnecessary interpersonal friction with supervisors (e.g. [Cullen et al., 2014](#)). Thus, political skill is not merely one subordinate-related antecedent among many, but it represents a theoretically central construct for explaining abusive supervision as a socially embedded and relational phenomenon.

Moreover, while previous literature may provide a theoretical foundation implying that political skill could limit abusive supervision ([Cullen et al., 2014](#); [Offergelt and Venz, 2023](#)), the mechanisms through which political skill shapes supervisors' behavioral patterns remain unclear. To address this void, the present study applies moral exclusion theory ([Opatow, 1990](#)) to explain why political skill could reduce abusive supervision. Specifically, we advance that politically skilled employees convert their social acumen into superior task performance and organization-directed organizational citizenship behavior (OCB-O). These valued contributions may lead supervisors to perceive such subordinates as more useful, cooperative and worthy of moral consideration, thereby positioning them within leaders' "moral inclusion" zone and reducing their exposure to abusive supervision.

In doing so, this study contributes to the existing literature in the following ways. First, while prior research investigated the buffering role of political skill in mitigating the detrimental effects of abusive supervision ([Offergelt and Venz, 2023](#)), we advance an alternative perspective whereby political skill is positioned as an important resource-related antecedent that can directly restrain abusive supervision. Second, drawing on moral exclusion theory, we advance novel mediating mechanisms (i.e. task performance and OCB-O) linking political skill to abusive supervision. This exploration complements previous research findings that link subordinates' underperformance to the emergence of abusive supervision ([Lian et al., 2014](#); [Walter et al., 2015](#)), and we add to this literature by identifying an important antecedent that can prevent this process from unfolding. Third, by employing a three-wave design of data collection, we examine the time-lagged associations between the constructs, which are consistent with the theorized temporal sequence. Meanwhile, our study is conducted within the Chinese context, where centralized and destructive forms of leadership remain prevalent and pose significant challenges for organizations, making practical solutions for abusive supervision particularly urgent ([Liang et al., 2016](#)).

Literature development

Subordinate-related antecedents and coping strategies of abusive supervision

It is natural and appropriate to scrutinize the perpetrators of abusive behaviors, as reflected by the dominant focus on supervisor-related antecedents in the existing research (Tepper *et al.*, 2017; Zhang and Bednall, 2016). The relative lack of attention to subordinate-related antecedents is somewhat understandable because scholars may have been overly cautious about appearing to blame the victims for the occurrence of abusive supervision (Fischer *et al.*, 2021). However, this research trend and the academic overlook prevent a more comprehensive understanding of other potential antecedents, thereby leaving a critical research gap (Harvey *et al.*, 2014; Walter *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, the victims themselves play a critical role in experiencing abusive supervision, because the phenomenon of abusive supervision is, in essence, an interactional process involving two parties. Scholars have raised the concern that abusive supervision could be volatile, highly dependent on certain subordinate characteristics and behaviors (Fischer *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, individual differences are critical factors influencing abusive supervision or put differently, triggering or preventing supervisory abusive behaviors (Zhang and Bednall, 2016). As one may expect, empirical evidence suggests that subordinates with negative attitudes and poor performance might experience more abusive supervision and vice versa (e.g. Harvey *et al.*, 2014; Lian *et al.*, 2014).

Initially, Tepper (2000) posited that abusive supervision might be conducted for the purpose of warning subordinates of malpractice and inaccurate behaviors. Lian *et al.* (2014) analyzed 20-month lagged data and discovered that subordinates' organizational deviance led to abusive supervision rather than the reverse. Additionally, using paired data from employees and their coworkers who shared the same supervisor, Harvey *et al.* (2014) found that psychologically entitled employees rated their supervisor as more abusive than did their coworkers, and these perceptions were associated with greater organizational deviance. In this manner, subordinates may recognize leaders as abusive or non-abusive based on their own dispositions, performance and experience. Hence, it is of critical importance to extend the knowledge of individual characteristics which can potentially restrain abusive supervision, subduing the sequential negative influence.

Political skill and abusive supervision

To cope with social demands, political skill has emerged in the literature as a relevant resource related protective factor. Political skill is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris *et al.*, 2005, p. 127). Ferris *et al.* (2005) conceptualized political skill into the four dimensions of social astuteness (i.e. strong awareness of social context), interpersonal influence (i.e. capability to influence others), networking ability (i.e. superior support of the extensive network) and apparent sincerity (i.e. genuine social image in the social fabric). Prior studies have regarded political skill as a critical personal resource to cope with a broad range of organizational demands and endow individuals with competencies in the workplace (Munyon *et al.*, 2015).

Specifically, individuals with political skill are better equipped to address social conflicts and foster positive relationships, thereby reducing the likelihood of negative interactions turning into severe stressors (Cullen *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, politically skilled individuals often possess higher emotional intelligence, enabling them to respond to social demands in ways that minimize friction (Munyon *et al.*, 2015). By helping individuals navigate complex social environments with tact and diplomacy, political skill could directly inhibit social stressors including abusive supervision. Empirical evidence has suggested that political skill plays a buffering role in the relationship between abusive supervision and knowledge hiding behaviors (Offergelt and Venz, 2023). However, the potential role of political skill as an antecedent of abusive supervision and the underlying mechanisms involved, are underexplored in the literature.

As leader–member interaction is an inevitable social process in organizations (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), it provides subordinates with opportunities to leverage social capabilities to achieve desired outcomes (Ferris et al., 2005). Following this rationale, Cullen et al. (2014) found that political skill reduced interpersonal mistreatment (e.g. workplace ostracism and interpersonal conflict), which is conceptually similar to abusive supervision, as leaders' abusive behaviors can be viewed as another form of mistreatment. Specifically, politically skilled subordinates have a "subtle and convincing personal style" that could allow them to have influential power with their leaders (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 129). Consequently, they are more versed in calibrating their behaviors to persuade leaders, thereby securing more favorable treatment. Moreover, political skill allows subordinates to appear more genuine and reliable (Cullen et al., 2014), increasing the credibility of their words and strengthening their social influencing power on leaders (Munyon et al., 2015). Furthermore, since politically skilled subordinates have a keen sense of others' needs (Ferris et al., 2005), they can respond promptly to leaders' specific demands and cultivate harmonious interactions (Munyon et al., 2015). Taken together, political skill represents an important personal resource, which enables employees to secure social advantages and thereby experience less abusive supervision. Thus, we predict the following hypothesis:

H1. Political skill is negatively related to abusive supervision.

Political skill, performance and abusive supervision

In contemporary organizations, the focus on increasing performance is critical, which is often institutionalized through performance management systems that tie leaders' success to subordinates' outputs (Aguilera et al., 2024). In such performance-oriented environments, supervisors attend closely to cues of subordinates' actual performance, making performance a key proximal basis for understanding variability in supervisory treatment (Lian et al., 2014). Accordingly, when leaders construe subordinate performance as inadequate or as threatening goal attainment, they may be more likely to respond with abusive supervision (Walter et al., 2015). Against this backdrop, political skill has been identified as a consequential personal resource that helps employees navigate workplace challenges and translate social effectiveness into tangible work outcomes, including higher task and contextual performance (Ferris et al., 2005). Taken together, this study examines whether performance-related processes can influence abusive supervision. Due to the current hypercompetitive business environment, whereby organizational survival and prosperity increasingly depends on employees not only completing their prescribed role responsibilities and tasks but also undertaking discretionary extra-role contributions (Fousiani et al., 2025), we focus on both task performance and OCB. Doing so enables a comprehensive assessment of individual performance, capturing both in-role and extra-role dimensions.

Task performance concerns employees' effectiveness in terms of fulfilling their responsibilities and duties as expected in their job descriptions (Williams and Anderson, 1991). Political skill has been widely conceptualized as an important social capability that is positively associated with task performance (Munyon et al., 2015). Although recent work suggests this association may vary in strength across different contexts (e.g. political will; Frieder et al., 2024), prior theorizing and meta-analytic evidence indicates a positive association on average (Ferris et al., 2005; Munyon et al., 2015). Accordingly, we treat the positive linkage between political skill and task performance as a baseline expectation. Specifically, political skill reflects subordinates' capacity to exert interpersonal influence, enabling them to build and leverage workplace networks to access instrumental resources (e.g. job-relevant information and coworkers' assistance) that help them meet task requirements (Ferris et al., 2005). Additionally, social astuteness vests subordinates with a sharp understanding of the job complexity and performance assessments, allowing them to diagnose and prioritize working responsibilities based on the significance and urgency and

thus accomplish tasks more efficiently (Munyon *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, we predict the following hypothesis:

H2. Political skill is positively related to task performance.

Beyond task performance, scholars have emphasized the important role of political skill in promoting contextual performance (Munyon *et al.*, 2015). OCB refers to discretionary actions that improve organizational effectiveness but are neither part of employees' in-role responsibility nor are they rewarded for them (Organ, 1997). OCB consist of two core categories. The first is OCB towards individuals (OCB-I) which points to citizenship behavior that benefits peers, such as altruistically helping other coworkers. The second is OCB towards the organization (OCB-O) which directly contributes to the organization, such as providing useful suggestions for improving organizational administration and development. Due to the interpersonal nature of OCB-I, it is typically directed toward coworkers and often occurs within peer-level exchanges. Such behaviors may therefore be less visible to supervisors and less likely to directly matter for supervisors' interests, limiting their potential influence on supervisory behavior. Accordingly, the present study focuses on OCB-O as the form of contextual performance most relevant to supervisors' behavioral responses, due to its high relevance to supervisors' interests (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000).

Indeed, previous literature has suggested that political skill could strengthen employees' capabilities of engaging in OCB-O (De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia, 2022). Specifically, political skill enhances awareness of organizational requirements and problems, enabling subordinates to undertake more effective actions in supporting and benefiting their organizations (Munyon *et al.*, 2015). For example, a sharp awareness of organizational demands can enable employees tailor their behaviors to situational needs, thereby engaging in more meaningful and niche-targeting discretionary behaviors (De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia, 2022). Moreover, by virtue of impression-management capability, politically skilled employees can better discern which specific types of OCB are more impactful, as well as when to enact them (Munyon *et al.*, 2015). Hence, politically skilled employees can strategically engage in discretionary behaviors that are more visible and likely to be recognized by leaders, thereby cultivating a favorable reputation. Moreover, the social influencing power and the network resources help politically skilled employees attain intended objectives (e.g. OCB-O) more effectively (Ferris *et al.*, 2005). Thus, political skill can streamline OCB-O enactment. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H3. Political skill is positively related to OCB-O.

While contentious, prior empirical research and managerial accounts suggest that subordinates' enacted behaviors and work-related conduct could elicit abusive responses from leaders, and importantly, this behavior-to-abuse temporal sequence appears to be not uncommon (e.g. Lian *et al.*, 2014; Walter *et al.*, 2015). Moral exclusion theory (Opotow, 1990) provides a compelling lens for understanding this phenomenon by indicating the psychological process through which certain individuals are perceived as falling outside the boundaries of moral concern, often leading to dehumanization, marginalization and exclusion from the established ethical standards (Opotow, 1990). This moral perception is believed to justify negative and harmful treatment towards excluded individuals (e.g. neglect, discrimination or indignity). In contrast, those who are morally included are viewed as deserving of care, justice and empathy, resulting in substantially better treatment. Accordingly, Walter *et al.* (2015) found that when subordinates had lower levels of task performance that seriously threatened leaders' goal attainments, they were likely to be morally excluded and perceive more abusive supervision.

Practically, moral exclusion in the contemporary workplace is often compounded by leaders' performance pressures, whereby performance metrics dominate evaluations of worth (Aguilera *et al.*, 2024). Leaders tend to justify their abusive behaviors under the guise of "necessary measures" or "performance promotion". Specifically, task underperformance

could predispose subordinates to moral exclusion, rendering those subordinates vulnerable targets for abusive supervision, because they are perceived as expendable or as obstacles to leader’s goal attainments and overall organizational benefit (Walter *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, the difference in the evaluation of task performance could reinforce the divide between subordinates considered worthy of moral standards and those excluded from such consideration. On the other hand, subordinates’ contextual performance could also potentially determine their positions within the leader’s moral scope. Although OCB is not formally assessed within the organizational evaluation system, leaders may still notice subordinates’ extra-role contributions to advancing organizational goals (OCB-O) through daily workplace interactions. That is because OCB-O could be closely aligned with leaders’ performance-related interests and may indirectly enhance leaders’ own evaluation outcomes (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000). For instance, subordinates known for constructive, helpful and altruistic behaviors are generally viewed more favorably by leaders, increasing their likelihood of gaining leaders’ goodwill (i.e. moral inclusion) and reducing their risk of abusive supervision. To enrich prior research linking subordinates’ performance to abusive supervision (Walter *et al.*, 2015), we propose the following hypotheses:

- H4. Task performance is negatively related to abusive supervision.
- H5. OCB-O is negatively related to abusive supervision.

The mediating role of task performance and OCB-O

In line with the above hypotheses, it is reasonable to expect that political skill enables employees to achieve better task performance and OCB-O, thereby reducing their likelihood of experiencing abusive supervision. Previous literature provides a broad resource-based foundation for conceptualizing political skill as a social resource, whereas task performance and OCB-O represent performance-based resources of subordinates to counteract or avert abusive supervision. However, less is known about how political skill might translate into performance behaviors and why such performance cues subsequently shape leaders’ behavioral patterns. Drawing on moral exclusion theory (Opotow, 1990), the present study explicates these proximal mechanisms. Specifically, moral exclusion theory suggests higher levels of performance, enabled by subordinates’ political skill, signal worthiness and contribution, thus increasing the likelihood that subordinates are morally included and, in turn, treated with greater respect and consideration from their leaders. Accordingly, enhanced task performance and OCB-O could constitute key mechanisms through which political skill restrains abusive supervision such that politically skilled subordinates are better able to convert their social resource into valued performance behaviors that subsequently reduce their exposure to abusive supervision (see Figure 1). Hence, we predict the following hypotheses:

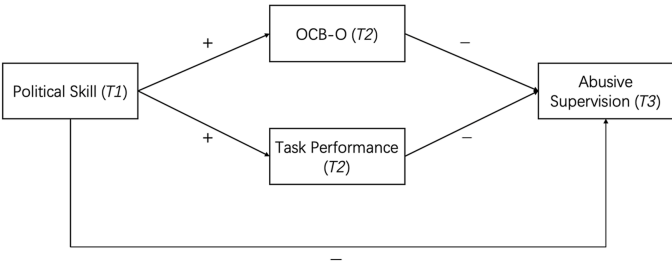


Figure 1. Hypothesized model

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- H6. Task Performance mediates the relationship between political skill and abusive supervision.
- H7. OCB-O mediates the relationship between political skill and abusive supervision.

Methodology

Sample and procedure

Surveys across all departments of the Chinese state-owned organization were carried out. Each department or workgroup is headed by a single leader and includes several members who report directly to that leader. Before commencing data collection, we performed a pilot test with two human resource managers and several employees to ensure the understandability and accuracy of the survey. Employee ratings were used because the focal behaviors are discretionary and not fully observable to supervisors, and prior evidence supports the validity of self-reported performance measures (Heidemeier and Moser, 2009). The surveys were distributed through WeChat, the most widely used social media platform in China. The survey cover page stated that participation was voluntary, and responses obtained were strictly confidential.

At Time 1, employees rated political skill and demographic information. At Time 2 (two weeks later), employees rated task performance and OCB-O. At time 3 (two weeks after Time 2), employees rated abusive supervision. A total of 280 staff members were invited to participate. At Time 1, 258 subordinates participated (response rate of 92.14%). At Time 2, 252 participated (response rate of 89.64%). At Time 3, 248 participated (response rate of 94.87%). Following procedures to identify careless responders (Meade and Craig, 2012), 11 participants were excluded according to the careless check items (e.g. uniformly choosing “5”). By matching the multi-time surveys, the final sample contains 224 participants nested within 37 groups, leading to a response rate of 80.0%. Among the participants, 155 (69.2%) were males and 69 (30.8%) were females; their average age was 42.93 years (standard deviation (SD) = 8.97); the average organizational tenure was 19.07 years (SD = 9.64) and the average time working with the current supervisor was 9.98 years (SD = 8.62).

Measures

Political skill. Ferris *et al.*'s (2005) 18-item scale was used to measure political skill. Participants answered a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). A sample item is “I have good intuition or savvy about how to present myself to others.” The Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

Task performance. Task performance was measured using the four-item scale from Williams and Anderson (1991). Items were measured on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A sample item is “I fulfill the responsibilities specified in my job description.” The Cronbach's alpha was 0.90.

OCB-O. OCB-O was measured with the three-item scale from Farh *et al.*'s (1997). Items were measured on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A sample item is “I actively raise suggestions to improve work procedures or processes.” The Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

Abusive supervision. Tepper's (2000) 15-item scale was used to measure abusive supervision. Employees answered items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never happens to me) to 5 (he/she always does this to me). A sample item is “My supervisor gives me silent treatment.” The Cronbach's alpha was 0.96.

Demographic and control variables. To eliminate spurious relationships and alternative explanations, gender, age, tenure, time worked with the supervisor and educational level were included as control variables. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that these demographic characteristics could show small but systematic associations with abusive supervision

(Zhang and Bednall, 2016). In addition, OCB-I was measured with the three-item scale of Farh *et al.* (1997) and controlled for in order to account for the possibility that interpersonal helping among employees may be visible to supervisors. However, because OCB-I primarily reflects interpersonal behaviors among coworkers, it was expected to be much less directly related to leaders' abusive behavior than OCB-O.

Analytic strategy

Due to the modest sample size ($N = 224$) and the nested nature of the data, we tested the hypothesized model using multilevel Bayesian structural equation modeling (BSEM) in Mplus 8. Compared with conventional approaches (e.g. ML-based multilevel SEM), BSEM has several advantages: First, BSEM uses Markov-chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) estimation to obtain posterior distributions and credible intervals for model parameters. This approach is particularly useful when the number or size of groups is limited, because conventional ML-based standard errors and fit indices can become unstable or less reliable under such data conditions (Muthén and Asparouhov, 2012). Second, weakly informative priors add a mild degree of regularization, reducing bias and suppressing boundary estimates caused by uneven group sizes. Third, Bayesian estimation provides comprehensive analysis of model convergence and evaluation of model fit (e.g. different trace plots), providing stronger evidence for the stability and credibility of the estimated parameters. Finally, BSEM yields full distributions for indirect effects without resampling, obviating complex bootstrap routines and enhancing the transparency of uncertainty quantification conditions (Muthén and Asparouhov, 2012).

Results

Preliminary tests

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations of the focal variables, which are consistent with initial predictions. Notably, gender, education, time worked with the supervisor and OCB-I were significantly correlated with abusive supervision.

To assess the degree of non-independence of the data due to containing employees from 37 groups, the intra-correlation coefficients were examined to evaluate the group-level variance. The results revealed that the ICC(1) of the dependent variables ranged from 0.02 to 0.12, suggesting nonsignificant between-group variance (James, 1982). The ICC(2) values ranged from 0.11 to 0.45, reflecting poor reliability of group means (James, 1982), suggesting group-level aggregation was not warranted. Accordingly, all variables were specified at the individual level, and team-level nesting was accounted for using a two-level specification with random intercepts in Mplus.

Measurement model

Given the sample size ($N = 224$) with large-scale measures (15-item abusive supervision, 18-item political skill), we followed Little *et al.*'s (2002) suggestions to employ the parceling method in the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in order to reduce the number of parameters and improve the indicator reliability. Specifically, we used domain-representative parceling (Cullen *et al.*, 2014) to create four parcels of political skill (i.e. networking ability, interpersonal influence, social astuteness and apparent sincerity), while we created two parcels for abusive supervision according to odd and even items (Little *et al.*, 2002), leaving task performance (four-item) and OCB-O (three-item) represented by their original items. The CFA test showed all parcel-based observed indicator factor loadings were significant ranging from 0.63 to 0.98 with an average of 0.83. The indices of our hypothesized four-factor model yielded a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 147.84$, $df = 59$, confirmatory factor analysis = 0.96, Tucker–Lewis index = 0.94, root mean square error of approximation = 0.08 and standardized root mean residual = 0.06) and outperformed a wide range of more parsimonious

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Political Skill ^b	4.25	0.83	(0.93)									
2. Abusive Supervision ^b	1.55	0.77	0.05	(0.96)								
3. Task Performance ^a	4.90	0.84	0.18**	0.16*	(0.90)							
4. OCB-O ^a	5.00	0.79	0.29**	-0.21**	0.55**	(0.88)						
5. OCB-I ^a	4.97	0.73	0.27**	-0.17*	0.50**	0.72**	(0.80)					
6. Gender ^a	1.31	0.46	-0.18**	-0.16*	0.02	-0.10	-0.04	1				
7. Age ^c	42.03	8.97	0.03	-0.10	-0.11	0.01	0.04	-0.23**	1			
8. Edu ^a	4.55	0.70	0.03	-0.15*	0.18**	0.07	-0.03	0.15*	-0.43**	1		
9. Tenure ^c	19.07	9.64	0.06	0.11	-0.08	0.04	0.08	-0.18**	0.85**	-0.37**	1	
10. Time with Supervisor ^c	9.98	8.62	0.07	0.16*	0.04	0.04	0.08	-0.16*	0.48**	-0.32**	0.52**	1

Note(s): *N* = 224 participants. ***p* < 0.01; **p* < 0.05, ^a1–10 scale, ^b10–20 scale, ^cYears

models. These results support the convergent and discriminant validity of the proposed measurement model.

Tests of hypotheses

Following recommended standards for BSEM (Muthén and Asparouhov, 2012), we applied 200,000 MCMC iterations with 100,000 iterations serving as a burn-in with four parallel chains. Based on the different evaluation criteria, the hypothesized model demonstrated a good fit to the data: posterior predictive p-value was 0.47, and the 95% posterior predictive checking confidence interval (CI) included zero [−20.82; 20.56] for the chi-square. The potential scale reduction decreased rapidly, falling below the cut-off of 1.05 after 1,100 iterations. Additionally, the inspections of the trace plots illustrated the typical pattern of MCMC, supporting the MCMC convergence. Additionally, the hypothesized model was estimated with the control variables included. The inclusion of these controls did not change the substantive pattern of results and the levels of statistical significance. The results are reported in Table 2.

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, political skill was not directly related to abusive supervision (B = 0.09; 95%CI [−0.03, 0.21]). Political skill was positively related to task performance (B = 0.27; 95%CI [0.15, 0.40]) and OCB-O (B = 0.10; 95%CI [0.04, 0.16]), thereby supporting hypotheses 2 and 3. Additionally, task performance was not related to abusive supervision (B = 0.01; 95%CI [−0.10, 0.11]), while OCB-O was negatively related to abusive supervision (B = −0.33; 95%CI [−0.53, −0.12]). Thus, hypothesis 4 was rejected, while hypothesis 5 was supported. Moreover, the mediating effect of task performance (B = 0.01; 95%CI [−0.03, 0.03]) was found to be non-significant between political skill and abusive supervision. Hypotheses 6 was therefore not supported. The mediating effect of OCB-O (B = −0.03; 95%CI [−0.07, −0.01]) was found to be significant, thereby supporting hypothesis 7.

Supplementary test

To assess the robustness of our findings, we tested the proposed model using conventional multilevel SEM with maximum likelihood estimation. The results showed a similar pattern to those obtained from the BSEM. Specifically, the mediating effect of OCB-O between political skill and abusive supervision remained significant (B = −0.07, *p* = 0.015, 95% CI [−0.12, −0.02]). Hence, the consistent substantive conclusions provide additional support for the robustness of our findings.

While OCB-I as a control variable was not associated with abusive supervision, we nevertheless tested the hypothesized model with OCB-I as a parallel mediator to examine its potential role. The results indicate that the mediating effect of OCB-I was nonsignificant, while the other results remained similar. Additionally, to understand the potential role of

Table 2. Tests of hypothesized model (BSEM)

Model path – individual level		B	Posterior SD	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
Political Skill	→Task Performance	0.27 ^a	0.08	0.15	0.40
Political Skill	→OCB-O	0.10 ^a	0.04	0.04	0.16
Political Skill	→Abusive Supervision	0.09	0.07	−0.03	0.21
Task Performance	→Abusive Supervision	0.01	0.06	−0.10	0.11
OCB-O	→Abusive Supervision	−0.33 ^a	0.13	−0.53	−0.12
Indirect_TP		0.01	0.02	−0.03	0.03
Indirect_OCB-O		−0.03 ^a	0.02	−0.07	−0.01

Note(s): Unstandardized model coefficients are presented; Indirect_TP and Indirect_OCB-O refer to the mediating effects of task performance and OCB-O, ^a95%-CI excludes zero

contextual factors on the proposed model, we conducted supplementary moderation analysis to explore several meaningful moderators. These include power distance, perceived organizational support, time worked with the supervisor, tenure, education, gender and age, since they might have an influence on abusive supervision (Zhang and Bednall, 2016). Overall, the results did not support any significant moderating effects. Given the exploratory nature of all these tests, we do not interpret these effects further. The supplementary analyses results are available on Open Science Framework.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Prior studies have evidenced that political skill plays a buffering role with respect to alleviating the detrimental effects of abusive supervision (Offergelt and Venz, 2023). However, until now, the direct relationship between political skill and abusive supervision, and the underlying mechanisms involved, are unclear. The study addresses this void by examining whether political skill can function as a core individual resource that directly counteracts abusive supervision. However, no direct relationship between political skill and abusive supervision was substantiated. This indicates that political skill may equip individuals with the ability to navigate organizational dynamics and interpersonal challenges (Ferris *et al.*, 2005), but it might still not immediately alter supervisors' abusive behavioral patterns. Rather, the results indeed indicate that the influence of political skill on abusive supervision appears to be indirect, operating through the mechanism of OCB-O.

While the results suggest that political skill is conducive to both OCB-O and task performance, only OCB-O mediates the relationship between political skill and abusive supervision. This highlights the prominent role of OCB-O as an underlying mechanism through which politically skilled subordinates encounter less abusive supervision. Drawing on moral exclusion theory (Opotow, 1990), leaders could be more likely to extend moral consideration to subordinates who are perceived as valuable, aligned and contributing members of the work unit. Political skill may facilitate this process by enabling employees to read situational cues and discern what "counts" in different organizational environments (Ferris *et al.*, 2005). Politically skilled employees are therefore better positioned to enact niche-targeted and high-impact OCB-O that advances unit and organizational goals (Munyon *et al.*, 2015). Their social astuteness and interpersonal influence further enable them to deliver these contributions efficiently and at opportune moments (Ferris *et al.*, 2005). From the leaders' perspective, such OCB-O is often instrumental to goal attainment, relatively visible and readily attributable to the focal subordinate, such as voicing suggestions for improvement. These behaviors may therefore signal both value and alignment with leaders' objectives (Walter *et al.*, 2015), increasing the likelihood that politically skilled employees are morally included and treated with greater respect and consideration than their less politically skilled counterparts.

Interestingly, the findings of the present study do not support a direct association between task performance and abusive supervision or the mediating role of task performance. This implies that improving task performance does not protect subordinates from abusive supervision. Unlike OCB-O, differences in subordinates' task performance are limited and practically indistinguishable due to the standardized and routine nature of performance evaluation (Williams and Anderson, 1991). Accordingly, leaders may be less attuned to the variation. Although political skill enables employees to effectively complete prescribed tasks, the disparity alone is unlikely to determine whether they are viewed as worthy of moral inclusion or exclusion. In fact, task performance is often considered as a baseline expectation, while leaders may place greater emphasis on discretionary factors. Overall, the findings complement existing literature by showing that different performance outcomes (in-role vs extra-role) and targets (by virtue of considering OCB-I in the supplementary analysis) differentially relate to subordinates' experiences of abusive supervision.

Practical implications

In the contemporary workplace, where competition is intense and survival is often performance-contingent, differential (i.e. “selective”) treatment has become normalized. Due to performance assessments, limited budgets and scarce resources, leaders’ behaviors may function as a strategic allocation of resources that supports their own effectiveness and survival, yet it can simultaneously create relational asymmetries that allow abusive supervision to emerge and persist. In such performance-oriented cultures, it is difficult to deny that individual self-improvement can be a no-nonsense strategy to avert abusive supervision, because high-performing subordinates often show upward-mobility, better working experiences and favorable treatment (Fousiani *et al.*, 2025). Importantly, political skill is a developable and malleable characteristic rather than being fixed (Ferris *et al.*, 2005). Our findings recommend employing training programs for employees focusing on accurately reading social cues, communication skill with supervisors, building networks and image management, which can help them navigate daily social demands (e.g. abusive supervision) while sustaining performance (Ferris *et al.*, 2005). This is especially relevant in contexts where abusive supervision is pervasive and systemic. However, political-skill training should not be framed as shifting the responsibility to employees to avoid mistreatment. Organizations’ primary responsibility is still to prevent supervisory abusive behaviors through managerial safeguards, such as clear supervisory behavioral standards and accessible reporting channels. Accordingly, a dual approach, developing employees’ political skill while strengthening managerial accountability, may offer a comprehensive actionable route to restraining abusive supervision.

Limitations and future directions

There are several limitations with this study. First, it does not fully consider how broader contextual factors influence our model. One particularly relevant variable is political will, as the effects of political skill may depend on individuals’ motivation to deploy it (Frieder *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, political skill may operate more strongly in Chinese context (e.g. relationism), as employees who can read hierarchical cues and maintain relationship quality may be better positioned to perform well and secure supervisor support. By contrast, in more egalitarian and individualistic Western contexts, the benefits of political skill may be weaker or more contingent. Additionally, given the long-tenured nature of our sample, the observed patterns may partly reflect the values of stable and bureaucratic settings, where interpersonal harmony and extra-role contributions is especially salient in supervisory evaluations. In younger sectors (e.g. technology startups), task performance may carry greater weight, potentially altering supervisory behavioral patterns. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to integrate cultural orientations and individual dispositions as boundary conditions and to replicate the model across industries with different organizational structures.

Second, the nonsignificant direct effect between political skill and abusive supervision might imply that the relationship is more nuanced than a single-channel explanation (i.e. OCB-O). Importantly, because OCB-O is discretionary and often reputation-relevant, it may reflect not only substantive citizenship contributions but also the extent to which such behaviors are visible and recognized. Without direct measures of impression management or performance visibility, we cannot fully determine whether political skill increases OCB-O itself or merely enhances its observability. Future research could incorporate explicit impression-management and/or visibility measures alongside multi-source indicators to partition these pathways. Consistent with Tepper *et al.*’s (2017) recommendation, future research could examine additional mediating pathways, such as impression management and workplace popularity, to clarify the overall pattern of effects.

Third, although our mediators and outcomes were assessed using employee self-reports, this approach has both advantages and limitations (Heidemeier and Moser, 2009). Employees may be better positioned to report discretionary and less observable behaviors (e.g. behind-the-scenes

OCB and some facets of task performance). However, self-reports can be affected by impression management and potential leniency in performance evaluations. Accordingly, while there is meaningful convergence between self- and supervisor-rated performance (Heidemeier and Moser, 2009), future studies should incorporate leader ratings (or objective indicators) to test supervisor-perception pathways more directly and to triangulate the robustness of the observed effects.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that subordinates' political skill can reduce abusive supervision through increasing contextual performance (i.e. OCB-O). In the real-world context where employees' perceptions, reactions and coping strategies are paramount, the study foregrounds the victim-side dynamics of abusive supervision which underscores the importance of subordinate-related antecedents in shaping how abusive supervision is experienced. While the findings do not justify employees' receiving fair treatment based on their superior performance, they do highlight practical ways in which subordinates may reduce the risk of abusive supervision.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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