

Supervisor Incivility and Employee Task Performance: The Role of Prevention Focus

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Abstract

Extant studies mostly have focused on the negative effects of supervisor incivility on the sustainability outcomes of employee and organization, while left its potential positive effects largely unexplored. Drawing on the perspective of power distance, our study examined the positive effect of supervisor incivility on employee task performance and the moderating role of prevention focus in this relationship. With data collected from 300 rank and file employees in China, we found that supervisor incivility positively affected employee task performance, and the employees with high prevention focus can strengthen this relationship. We further discussed the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Keywords: Supervisor Incivility; Employee Task Performance; Prevention Focus; Power Distance Perspective

1. Introduction

Supervisor incivility, defined as supervisor's low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the subordinate, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), was a ubiquitous phenomenon that hindered the sustainable growth of enterprises and has captured the increasing attention of scholars and practitioners (Liu et al., 2017). For example, Porath and Pearson (2010) indicated incivility has a large financial impact on companies, with the annual cost of experiencing incivility estimated at \$14,000 per employee. In addition, much of the supervision incivility research also has explored its negative effects on the sustainability outcomes of employee and organization, including lowering job satisfaction, employee creativity and employee psychological safety (Schilpzand, De Pater & Erez, 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020). However, a little research found that destructive leadership such as abusive supervision had positive influence on employee sustainability behaviors (Decoster et al., 2013; Qin et al., 2018; Zhang & Liu, 2018; Zhu & Zhang, 2019). For example, Lee, Yun and Srivastava (2013) found that modest abusive supervision indeed promoted employees' creativity performance in a sample of South Korean employees. Abusive supervision referred to employees' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engaged in sustained hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact (Tepper, 2000). There was a main reason of these counterintuitive conclusions may be the differences between Asian and Western cultures especially for power distance (Zhang & Liu, 2018; Zhu & Zhang, 2019). Power distance was defined as to the extent to which the lower ranking individual expects the legitimacy of unequally distributed power in a society (Hofstede, 1980). Specifically, in the Anglo-American culture of low power distance, employees believed that everyone is created equally, and they are easily hurt by abusive supervision (Hofstede, 2001). However, employees from a high-power distance culture considered that the instructions from their superiors should be respected, and negative leadership behaviors had less effect on them (Lee, Pillutla & Law, 2000). It is well known that China is a country with high power distance, so employees here tend to have a higher degree to accept organizational hierarchy and status differences (Brockner et al., 2001). In other words, in the context of high-power distance culture, negative leadership behaviors may not always bring about negative effects but positive effects (Mitchell, Vogel & Folger, 2015; Qin et al., 2018). In China, however, destructive leadership was more likely to be displayed in the form of supervisor incivility (Liu et al., 2017). Therefore, we investigated possible positive effects of supervisor incivility on employee task performance.

Meanwhile, previous studies also indicated that regulatory focus (such as prevention focus) shaped how individual perceive their environment and how to respond to it, in particular, it was likely to influence employees' perception of their job performance (Lieberman et al., 2001). For example, Shao, Li and Mawritz (2018) demonstrated that prevention focus moderated the relationship between abused peer and third parties' performance effort. Meanwhile, the bystanders with a high prevention focus would work harder because their colleagues were abused. Prevention focus refers closely related to safety needs, and was a psychological defense mechanism for employees to maintain job stability, avoid failure and loss, and make self-defense (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). While suffering from supervisor incivility, employees with different prevention focus would make efforts on task performance differently. Therefore, we introduced prevention focus as a boundary condition to explore its affect in the relationship between supervisor incivility and employee task performance.

In sum, based on the perspective of power distance, the current study explored the influence of supervisor incivility on employee task performance and the moderating role of prevention focus. It not only enriched the literature on supervisor incivility in Chinese culture, but also provided some suggestions from this study for the sustainability of employees and organizations.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1 Supervisor Incivility and Employee Task Performance

Task performance refers to the contribution made by employees to the core technology of the organization through direct production activities, providing materials or services (Tsui et al., 1997). Previous studies have proved that negative leadership (e.g., abusive supervision) can improve task performance (Lv, 2013), or even creativity (Zhu & Zhang, 2019). In addition, many scholars have studied the positive effect of leadership's negative emotions (such as leader's anger), which were positively related to leadership's negative behaviors, on employee performance (Tiedens, 2001). For example, Lindebaum and Fielden (2011) demonstrated that leaders who expressed their negative emotions through facial expression, vocal and other nonverbal action appropriately can help subordinates to correct their behaviors; Chi and Ho (2014) also found that the leader's negative emotions may play a significant role in promoting employee performance. When leaders expressed their negative emotions to their subordinates in uncivil and without intent to harm, the subordinates may deem it as a reminder to correct their behaviors or work harder. Thus, supervisor incivility may promote employee task performance.

Meanwhile, subordinates in a high power distance country (e.g., China) had considerable dependence on supervisors (Bao et al., 2021), and they were more likely to respect, obey and trust their supervisors after receiving uncivil behaviors from supervisors (Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000; Kirkman et al., 2009). That is to say, employees may think their supervisors expected high job performance or were dissatisfied with their task performance, which may inspire employees' job passion (Lv, 2013; Zhu & Zhang, 2019). As a result, those targeted subordinates will put more efforts into their work and improve their task performance. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Supervisor incivility has a positive effect on employee task performance.

2.2 Moderating Effect of Prevention Focus

Prevention focus is related to safety needs, and individuals who with prevention focus will take more cautious behaviors and tend to avoid negative results and minimize losses (Zhang, Cornwell & Higgins, 2014; Higgins & Pinelli, 2020). When individuals who focused on prevention receive feedback about failure, they may take action to improve their performance efforts for avoiding punishment (Van Dijk & Kluger, 2004). Other study showed that, the most important thing for individuals with prevention focus was to maintain the status quo and avoid punishment (Halvorson & Higgins, 2013). Therefore, employees with high prevention focus will choose to work harder to complete or improve task performance in order to avoid punishment (Shao, Li & Mawritz, 2018).

In addition, employees who worked in high power distance organizations could fully understand the asymmetry of powers and resources between themselves and their supervisors, and were conscious in a passive obedience position (Kirkman et al., 2009). They were more likely to trust and obey their supervisors, and to accept their supervisors' views and behaviors (Peltokorpi, 2019). Therefore, when employees with higher prevention focus suffered from supervisor incivility, they may rationalize supervisor incivility, and then regulated their behaviors to meet supervisors' requirements (Lanaj, Chang & Johnson, 2012). That is to say, this kind of employees will try to perform tasks harder than before in order to avoid punishment from supervisors. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: Employees with prevention focus moderate the positive effect of supervisor incivility on employee task performance, such that the positive effect is stronger for employees with high levels of prevention focus.

Based on the above analysis, this research establishes conceptual model in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The research conceptual model

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Procedure

All the samples for this study were from rank and file employees of five manufacturing enterprises in southern China. Study of Duan and colleagues (2018) have shown that front-line employees in manufacturing industries often had a high power distance orientation and were willing to respect and obey their supervisors. We used online electronic questionnaires to send out 350 questionnaires, and all participants were voluntary and anonymous. After excluding the invalid questionnaires with missing items and too single options, 300 valid questionnaires were obtained, and the effective questionnaire rate was 85.7%. The 300 respondents were all employees, of which 189 (63%) were women. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 50 years old (of which 85% were under 35). In terms of academic qualifications, there were 158 undergraduates (52.7%) and 15 masters or doctors (5%).

3.2 Measures

In order to ensure the validity of the measurement, we used the mature scale developed by other researchers, and strictly followed the translation-back translation procedure to appropriately revise the scale questions (Brislin, 1970). All scales were scored by Likert5 points (1=“strongly disagree”; 5=“strongly agree”).

Supervisor incivility. We measured supervisor incivility with a 12-items scale developed by Liu and Dai (2012). A sample item is “My supervisor made disparaging, rude or degrading comments about me”. ($\alpha=.945$)

Employee Task performance. We measured task employee performance with 4 items scale developed by Gong, Huang and Farh (2009). A sample item is “Subordinates can perform all job duties adequately”. ($\alpha=.939$)

Prevention focus. Using the “Regulatory Focus Questionnaire” (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001) revised by Yao and other researchers (2008), we asked employee to evaluate themselves on prevention focus. The revised Chinese version of RFQ contains 4 items for prevention focus. A sample item is “I always follow the rules set by parents”. ($\alpha=.608$)

Control variable. In this paper, gender, age, firm tenure, education level and position were selected as control variables by referring to previous studies (Liu et al., 2018; Shin & Hur, 2020).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

As shown in Table 1. Supervisor incivility and task performance showed a positive correlation ($\gamma=.218$, $p<.01$), and there were a positive correlation between supervisor incivility and prevention focus ($\gamma=.685$, $p<.01$), prevention focus and task performance also had a positive correlation ($\gamma=.330$, $p<.01$). All the results preliminarily supported the hypothesis of main effect in this study, namely hypothesis 1. In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all scales were above .60, indicating that the reliability of the scale was quite high.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of variables (N=300)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.63	.484							
2. Age	2.25	1.023	-.101						
3. Firm tenure	2.11	1.116	-.168**	.632**					
4. Education level	2.49	.791	.038	-.224**	-.150**				
5. Position	1.72	.871	-.154**	.193**	.293**	.178**			
6. SI	3.000	.957	-.103	.273**	.256**	-.148*	.159** (.945)		
7. ETP	3.742	.779	.023	-.024	.050	.054	-.006	.218** (.939)	
8. PF	3.095	.929	-.154**	.169**	.226**	-.135*	.177**	.685**	.330** (.608)

Note. SI = Supervisor Incivility; ETP = Employee Task Performance; PF = Prevention Focus; Reliabilities (Cronbach's α) are on the diagonal in parentheses; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

Main effect test. This study used the method of regression analysis to verify the hypothesis. As shown in Table 2, the gender, age, firm tenure, education level and position as a control variable into the regression model. Then, the stepwise entry method was used to put the supervisor incivility into the regression model. Results showed that the supervisor incivility was positively correlated with employee task performance ($\beta=.305$, $p<.001$, M2). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Table 2. Regression analysis of main effects (N=300)

Type of the Variable		Employee Task Performance	
		M1	M2
Control Variable	Gender	.068	.092*
	Age	-.056	-.100*
	Firm tenure	.110*	.084*
	Education level	.054*	.084*
	Position	-.018	-.048*
Independent	SI		.305***
	F	.905	3.252
	R ²	.024	.092***
	ΔR^2	-.003	.063

Note: SI = Supervisor Incivility; *** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

Moderation results. As shown in Table 3, after putting the interaction term formed by supervisor incivility and prevention focus into M4, and the interaction coefficient of supervisor incivility and prevention focus was significant ($\beta=.188$, $p<.01$, M4), $R^2=.195$ ($p<.01$), which indicated that prevention focus play a positively moderating role between supervisor incivility and employee task performance.

Table 3. Moderated regression results (N=300)

Type of the Variable		Employee Task Performance			
		M1	M2	M3	M4
Control Variable	Gender	.068	.092*	.144*	.121*
	Age	-.056	-.100*	-.065*	-.049
	Firm tenure	.110*	.084*	.061*	.045*
	Education level	.054*	.084*	.107*	.127*
	Position	-.018	-.048*	-.072*	-.083*
Independent	SI		.305***		-.018
Moderator	PF			.396***	.320***
Interaction term	SI×PF				.188**
	F	.905	3.252	6.183	6.350
	R ²	.024	.092***	.161***	.195**
	ΔR^2	-.003	.063	.135	.164

Note: SI = Supervisor Incivility, PF = Prevention Focus; *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

According to the methods and procedures proposed by Aiken and West (1991), we drew figure of moderating role that the relationship of prevention focus between supervisor incivility and employee task performance. As shown on Figure 2, we can see that low prevention focus (M-1SD) and high prevention focus (M+1SD) had influence on employee task performance. Therefore, compared with the low prevention focus, the employees with high prevention focus can strengthen the relationship between supervisor incivility and employee task performance, and the hypothesis 2 was supported.

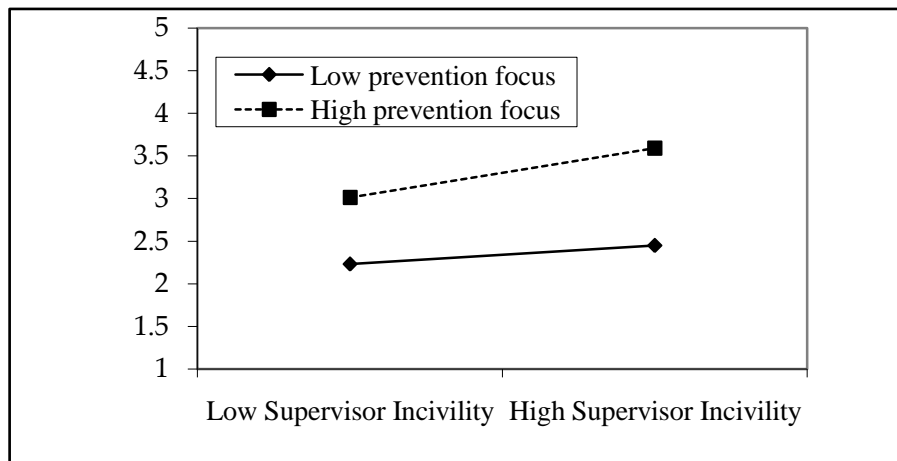


Figure 2. Moderating effect of prevention focus

5. Discussion

We examined the influence of supervisor incivility on employee task performance in Chinese context that is characterized by a high power distance and the moderating effect of prevention focus in this relationship. We found that supervisor incivility had a significant positive impact on employee task performance and that this relationship was moderated by prevention focus. Specifically, the positive effect was stronger for employees with high levels of prevention focus. These findings had meaningful theoretical and managerial implications.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Our findings contributed to the literature on leadership, task performance, and prevention focus in three primary ways. First and foremost, we found that supervisor incivility has a significant positive impact on employee task performance in a country with high power distance. Previous research on supervisor incivility in the workplace almost suggested that negative leadership behavior, such as abusive supervision and authoritarian leadership, had a significant negative impact on employee task performance (Murari, 2013; Schaubroeck, Shen & Chong, 2017). From power distance perspective, our research complemented this gap by revealing supervisor incivility can promote employee task performance. Thus, we enriched the research on negative leadership behavior and provided a more comprehensive perspective for understanding leadership. Second, our research also enriches positive antecedents of task performance. Scholars have proved that positive leadership behavior, such as transformational leadership and charismatic leadership, can promote employee task performance (Top, Abdullah & Faraj, 2020; Meslec et al., 2020), but more or less ignored the positive effects of negative leadership on it, like supervisor incivility. Therefore, studying the positive role of supervision incivility on task performance expanded antecedent nomological network of task performance. Finally, our research broadened the model of dark leadership by unveiling the contingent roles of prevention focus in stimulating the effect of supervisor incivility on task performance. Subordinates respond differently to supervisor incivility-seeking behavior depending on the extent to their prevention focus. However, empirical research that examines followers' prevention focus for leader behavior is still scarce (Liu et al., 2012). Thus, the results may generate crucial insights into the research on leadership process and consequences.

5.2 Managerial Implications

Our research findings also brought in significant implications to management practice as well. As discussed above, we found that supervisor incivility positively affected employee task performance, and this positive relationship was moderated by prevention focus. Therefore, to promote employee task performance, a moderate amount of supervisor incivility should be tolerated in the organizations with a high-power-distance culture. At the same time, junior staffs with higher prevention focus usually are lack of initiative at work (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). When they face threat such as supervisor incivility they take whatever steps are needed to avoid risk and punishment, and then take prudent measures to get rid of the threat through improving performance proactively. Therefore, for employees who with high prevention focus, supervisors should adopt more rigorous methods when motivating them, such as setting high performance goals with certain pressure. However, it should be not suitable for employees at higher levels. Managers should take different management measures according to different level employees.

5.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although we have contributed significantly to the literature and practice of supervisor incivility and employee task

performance, there was also some limitations in our study. First of all, we only collected cross-sectional data and ignored the influence of time on variables, which limited us to examine the dynamic influence of supervisor incivility on employee task performance. Although our conclusion showed that supervisor incivility had a significant positive impact on employee task performance, it is necessary for future studies to re-verify our findings with multiple data to obtain more accurate results. Secondly, due to the limited time and resources of the survey, we only selected one region in China to collect our samples, and the industries involved also have certain limitations. However, studies like the relationship between supervisor incivility and employee task performance may be bound by culture (Graham, Dust & Ziegert, 2018). In the future, we hope scholars to consider applying our conceptual model and research design to other regions or countries to improve the external validity of our findings.

Another limitation is that all respondents in our study were junior staff. A power imbalance between employees and their supervisors resulted in them who were much dependence with their supervisors. Under low power condition, employee who suffered supervisor incivility justify their supervisor negative behavior as worth enduring for the good of the organization, or protecting one's self-interests.

With the employee power is low to moderate, tolerance with incivility will be temporary rather than sustained because the employee depends on the supervisor declining gradually (Shipp & Richardson, 2021). Then it leads individual to eventually disengage from work which reduce task performance. Therefore, employees with position power such as supervisor become the victims of supervision incivility whether it can improve the task performance to be further explored. Finally, it should also be noted that inverted U-curve relationship will be existed between supervisor incivility and employee task performance. Some research indicated that workplace incivility had negative impact on task performance (Chen et al., 2013; Porath & Erez, 2007). Aside from the power distance culture, which mentioned above, our study didn't consider other variables such as attribution for performance-promotion or injury initiative which can mitigate or strengthen the negative effect of abuse supervision (Liu et al., 2012), the desire for self-enhancement (i.e., narcissism, promotion focus) which may be more likely to perceive supervisor incivility as a threat to their positive self-views and take whatever steps are needed to avoid to be the victim (Chen et al., 2013). This kind of employee will disengage from their work, which leading to reduce task performance. Thus, an important direction for research is that takes into these variables.

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