
FORMS, PRACTICES AND RAMIFICATIONS OF ABUSIVE SUPERVISION IN UNIVERSITIES: A SOCIAL JUSTICE SCRUTINY

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Abstract

Universities have experienced a phenomenal increase in the incidences of abusive supervision. The practices of abuse in leadership are manifested in different forms and shapes. These unjust and unfair practices are perpetuated in different divisions and sections of the university leadership and are counterproductive. The overarching purpose of this study is to scrutinize the different kinds of abusive supervision practices and their ramifications. This examination takes the form of the extensive and intensive analysis and synthesis of extant and apposite authoritative literature. In addition, to strengthen the scientific rigor and soundness of this examination, I deploy the three-dimensional social justice theory of Nancy Fraser as a framework. This study is significant in that it provides epistemological insights into abusive supervision in universities. The findings confirm scholarly evidence of the prevalence of acts of abuse in various forms such as sexual harassment, exclusionary decision-making practices, designed and strategic isolation of dissenting voices, and selective promotional practices.

Keywords: *Abusive supervision; universities; recognition; representation; social justice*

1. Introduction

Leadership in organizations is critical in that the rise and fall of every organization rests squarely in the main on the type and brand of leadership that is employed. This supposition corroborates with the expression of Al Khajeh (2018) that the success and failure of every organization depend on organizational leadership. The main purpose of organizational leadership is to ensure that organizational citizenship performs optimally. Leadership has the fiduciary duty to ensure that they create socially just and fair opportunities for subordinates to excel in the workspace. As a result, leaders should operate and conduct themselves within given and specified ethical and professional conduct. The professional conduct of leadership is fundamental in creating a balance

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between member needs, organizational demands, and the ability to reach organizational goals (Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). A demand is placed on organizational leadership to create a culture that enhances the performance of subordinates. A plethora of studies confirm that there is a relationship between organizational culture and high performance (Nikpour, 2017; Warrick, 2017; Arif, Zainudin & Hamid, 2019). The way leaders conduct themselves can create an organizational culture that can either constrain or enable employees to achieve.

University leadership and management are entrusted with immense power to ensure that the academic agenda is protected and achieved. In achieving this goal, university employees should find themselves working in an environment that is socially just, human, civil, healthy, and enabling. These conditions serve as socially just antecedents for high performance. This does not mean that ill-discipline in the workplace should be promoted, and underperformance should be dealt with by university policy prescriptions underpinned by just and fair principles. The promotion of socially just practices should be on top of the university agenda. Hauff, Krick, Klebe, and Felfe (2022) argue that leadership that takes value and promotes employee well-being increases high performance. Supervision that promotes a work culture that disrespects, does not value staff members, belittles employees, and treats them as objects border on social injustice and is unsustainable. This type of supervision can be characterized as abusive and constrains and stifles performance and the achievement of organizational objectives.

Higher education space is not immune to supervision that is abusive and manifests in different forms and shapes (Fasanmi & Seyama, 2023). These unpalatable leadership practices take place in different divisions and sections of the universities and particular leadership positions. This uncivil, anti-social, and counterproductive behavior is characterized by different forms of harassment, bullying, talking down colleagues, selective promotion, and many other malfeasant practices. The overarching purpose of this study was to a) examine different forms of abusive practices and b) explore the ramifications of these practices on staff members. This paper is organized in the following order: In section one, I provide the comprehension of the construct of abusive supervision from varied authoritative scholars. The next theme takes a deep dive into the samples of dominant manifestations of abusive supervision in universities ranging from sexual harassment, deliberate exclusionary decision-making, intentional and targeted social exclusion of dissenting voices, and unfair and unjust promotional processes. The study further provides an examination of the ramifications of abusive supervision on subordinates. The deployment of the three-dimensional social justice theory of Nancy Fraser helps in grounding the thesis of this study, which is also part of the thematic strand explored. I also provide sound and practical recommendations for universities to mitigate abusive supervisory practices.

2. Overview of related literature

2.1. A brief scholarly conceptualization of the construct abusive supervision.

A plethora of studies indicate that abusive supervision has multiple negative effects on the organization and individuals as victims (Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Rice, Taylor, & Forrester, 2020). Further, these abusive practices contribute negatively to organizational growth and performance. The comprehension of the construct abusive supervision is varied from a scholarly perspective and depends on the perceptions of victims. Fischer, Tian, Lee, and Hughes (2021) argue that the construct of abusive supervision is conceptualized in a confused manner that conflates subordinates' subjective assessment and understanding of abuse by leaders. This study is foregrounded and undergirded by the definition of abusive supervision from the understanding of one of the leading scholars in the scholarship of abusive supervision, namely, Tepper. It can be argued that Tepper is the pioneer and the advocate of abusive supervision theory. Tepper (2000, Tepper, 2007) conceptualized abusive supervision as follows:

“subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact”.

Further scholarly examination of abusive supervision by Tepper, Simon, and Park (2017) resulted in the characterization of this concept as follows: uncontrolled outbursts, inappropriate blaming, and public ridicule. The authors continue to indicate that when referring to these kinds of behaviors, researchers have used several terms including petty tyranny, supervisor aggression, supervisor undermining, abrasive, cruel, malevolent, (showing a wish to do evil), spiteful, hostile (Blasé & Blasé 2004; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017; Sun, Xu, Kluemper, Lu, & Yun, 2023). Abusive supervision is further characterized by behaviors that are uncivil, harmful, disrespecting, demeaning, intimidating humiliating, and dehumanizing colleagues Khumalo, 2019) irrespective of the positions they hold, junior or senior. Having provided a brief description of abusive supervision, the theme that follows synoptically provides forms of dominant abusive supervision in universities.

2.2. Dominant manifestations of abuse in universities

As argued earlier, the phenomenon of abusive supervision in universities is prevalent. These forms of abuse are reported in various platforms such as the media space (Henry, 2017), and are experienced in universities globally. These abuses manifest in various forms and in extreme cases incidences of sexual favors are demanded by bosses (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Lombardinilo, 2019), the selling of posts in the form of money and articles written for those in authority, and many other horrifying occurrences. These cruel acts perpetuated by supervisors are the abuse of power. For Safi, Sapi, and Kayen (2024), power abuse can take many forms, including bullying, harassment, discrimination, and nepotism. Workplace bullying, mobbing, incivility, harassment, and social exclusion are the most notable toxic effects of what takes place in universities (Oleksiyenko, 2018). This scholar further postulates that power abuse is a common phenomenon in several

organizations including higher education spaces and individuals misuse their influential positions for personal gains. Despite practices of the plethora of abuses in universities, this article focuses on the following categories which are crucial and deserve attention:

2.3. Sexual assault and harassment

This kind of abuse is very prevalent and universities have experienced incremental occurrences of such incidences (Lombardino, 2019). Cortina and Areguin (2021) describe sexual harassment as unwanted sex-related behavior at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive or threatening her well-being. Cortina and Areguin (2021: 287) further maintain that “sexual coercion refers to attempts, both explicit and implicit, to make the conditions of employment contingent on sexual cooperation. This includes promises of professional rewards in exchange for sexual favors (e.g., making a job offer contingent on a sex act), as well as threats of professional harm (e.g., demotion, termination) if sexual demands are not met”. Berdahl (2007) defines sexual harassment as applicable to any gender as a broad domain of behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual sex. Despite universities trying to address this in the form of legislative interventions, these incidences continue to occur unabatingly. Sexual abuse manifests in various forms. Fitzgerald’s Tripartite Model of Sexual Harassment (1997) includes gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Wells and Kracher (1993) identify two forms namely when the victim is promised employment benefits or advantage in return for sexual favor or denied continued employment for refusing to participate in such act. The second form is hostile sexual harassment, which is constituted when an employer’s work performance suffers because of sex-related behaviors in the workplace creating an intolerable work environment (Wells & Kracher (1993).

The incidences of sexual harassment in universities are further captured in a book titled “Unsafe spaces: Ending sexual abuse in Universities” co-authored by Tutchell and Edmonds (2020). In their book, the authors acknowledge that sexual harassment and abuse in universities are far more prevalent, and the situation is worse than they have imagined. The views expressed in the work of Tutchell and Edmonds paint a bleak and horrific picture of the unjust and unfair treatment victims go through. The challenge is that even if these abuses are reported and provocateurs are disciplined, the victims are left with lifelong personal scars because they have been violated.

2.4. Deliberate exclusionary decision making

Decision-making is key in universities. Scott and Bruce (1995) describe decision-making as a habitual, learned response pattern an individual exhibits when confronted with a problem or a situation. Bose, Reina, and Marshall (2017) “consider collective decision-making as a subfield of collective behavior concerned with how groups reach decisions without centralized leadership”. It is therefore critical that those in leadership have to ensure that they robustly establish fair decision-making structures, just and provide staff members with opportunities to air their views without fear of being targeted. Decision-

making is part of knowledge sharing which is the bedrock of business performance and sustainability (Islam, Ahmad, Kaleem & Mahmood (2021).

Decision-making in organizations has implications for organizational performance and citizenship behavior (Sukirno & Siengthai, 2011). Taking centralized decisions without including staff members is unjust, and unfair and can be classified as mistreatment. This perceived injustice creates relationship problems between management and subordinates and can negatively impact the organization. Fraser (2003) argues that participatory parity is creating conditions that afford all individuals in this case, staff members of the university to be represented and recognized in decision-making processes. Her recognition and representation theory of justice promotes an inclusive decision-making process.

2.5. Intentional isolation and targeted social exclusion of dissenting voices

It is common for leadership in universities to expect compliance from members of the staff, academics, and administration. It is always the wish and intention of abusive organizational leadership to recruit subordinates who are pliable, conforming, and silent. If leadership had their way, they would love to employ such staff members. Unfortunately, not all subordinates behave the same in the workplace. Alford (2001) and Schwartz (1990) assert that leaders and managers place a high value on conformity, order, and authority which they expect from their employees. Marginalization of targeted individuals because of expressing divergent views can be perceived as injustice. It is the suppression of the principles of social justice. University leadership should understand that their decisions will always be challenged and there will always be voices of difference. Organizational members (staff) do not respond the same when organizational leadership interacts with them. Some, for some reason, keep silent and some are very vocal and express views that challenge the norm especially when leadership violates legal or social norms. Brinsfield, Edwards, and Greenberg (2009) refer to this as principled organizational dissent. These voices are dissenting and should not be targeted for marginalization. Shahinpoor and Matt (2007) characterize dissent act that positions one from the group, as somebody who is outspoken based on principle, Hirschman (1970) cited in Shahinpoor and Matt (2007) defines it as a public act of conscientious or principled disagreement of voice and individuals who stand out. Shahinpoor and Matt (2007) further posit that staff members who challenge leadership decisions are likely to face consequences and stiff resistance. In an event where these dissenting voices are maligned, then this is unjust and unfair. These practices of an attempt by the leadership to silence the dissenting voices promote injustice and negate Rawls's (1971) perceptions of a just society. Rawls's understanding of justice and building just communities negate any attempt to malign the voices of staff members who hold different views on several issues.

2.6. Unethical and selective promotional opportunities

Ethics is central in leadership (Hartman & Conklin, 2015) and unethical conduct is related to abusive supervision. Ethical leadership constitutes “appropriate conduct through

personal actions and interpersonal relationships.....” (Qing Asif, Hussain & Jameel, 2020). As a result, leadership must ensure that ethics are institutionalized in every facet of their practices including promotion (Jose & Thibodeaux, 1991). Promotional processes should be based on ethical just practices and principles of fairness, merit, and transparency. Candidates who are promoted should meet the requirements and should be competent, skillful, and fit for purpose.

Tightly related to the second dominant form of abuse discussed above is the consequence of being brave, standing out, and taking authority head-on. Staff members who challenge authority and who refuse to conform to the norm are not afforded promotion opportunities. They face workplace ill-treatment in the form of unreasonable management practices (Hodgins & McNamara (2017) including exclusionary and selective promotion. Leadership devises subtle ways of ensuring that they (dissenting voices) do not climb the ladder of promotion even if they deserve it and are competent. Promotion is not merit-based but has eyes and is based on employees who are docile, pliable, and compliant. This compromises recruitment processes, and it is also an indication of leadership which goes to the extent of appointing subordinates who conform to abusive practices.

3. Ramifications of abusive supervision on subordinates

Abusive supervision is detrimental and to the extreme can be severe and perpetrators make it organizational culture. Researchers who intensively studied abusive supervision in organizations concluded that it is disastrous and erodes the ethical work environment by violating moral standards and reflecting other questionable unjust practices that result in dire consequences to the victims (Tepper, 2000; Tepper, 2007, Zhang & Liao, 2015; Walter, Lam, Van Der Vegt, Huang, & Miao, 2015; Fischer, Tian, Lee & Hughes, 2021). Mistreated employees experience a myriad of feelings of injustice, resentment, and frustration that can result in deviant aggressive retaliations which can harm the provocateur. Further, the consequences of abusive supervision may include increased stress, lower job satisfaction, decreased morale, higher turnover rates, and reduced organizational commitment among employees. The next theme briefly categorizes critical commonly experienced ramifications of abusive supervision.

Scholarly evidence suggests that abusive supervision affects subordinates psychosocially and emotionally. Wheeler, Halbesleben, and Whitman (2013), Erdemir (2015), Samnani (2021), and Sun, Xu, Kluemper, Lu, & Yun, (2023) studies attest to this and established that subordinates’ perceptions of abusive supervision are associated with increased emotional exhaustion and psychological strain. Psychological and emotional implications extend to followers’ performance levels. An employee who is emotionally and psychologically drained cannot perform to the optimum. Contrary to leaders' belief that putting subordinates under pressure increases performance, psychologically and emotionally distressed employees experience decreased performance levels. This finding resonates well with the views of Samnani, Singh, and Ezzedeen (2013) when they posit that workplace bullying behavior is likely to lower the levels of performance.

Abusive supervision breeds counter-aggressive conduct from followers. Research has demonstrated that employees who are consistently abused end up fighting back in various forms, such as being aggressive and fighting back. Contrary to the belief that abused employees are unable to retaliate against the abusive supervisor, Lian, Brown, Ferris, Liang, Keeping, and Morrison (2014) maintain that studies have shown that abused employees do retaliate. Similarly, Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) in their study demonstrate that when individuals attribute responsibility to a harm-doer, they respond with anger and retaliation. These authors, Similarly, Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) further argue that victims seek to “make the wrongdoer pay” for a transgression or event that harms or jeopardizes them in some meaningful way.

4. Framing the study within Nancy Frasers’ theory of justice

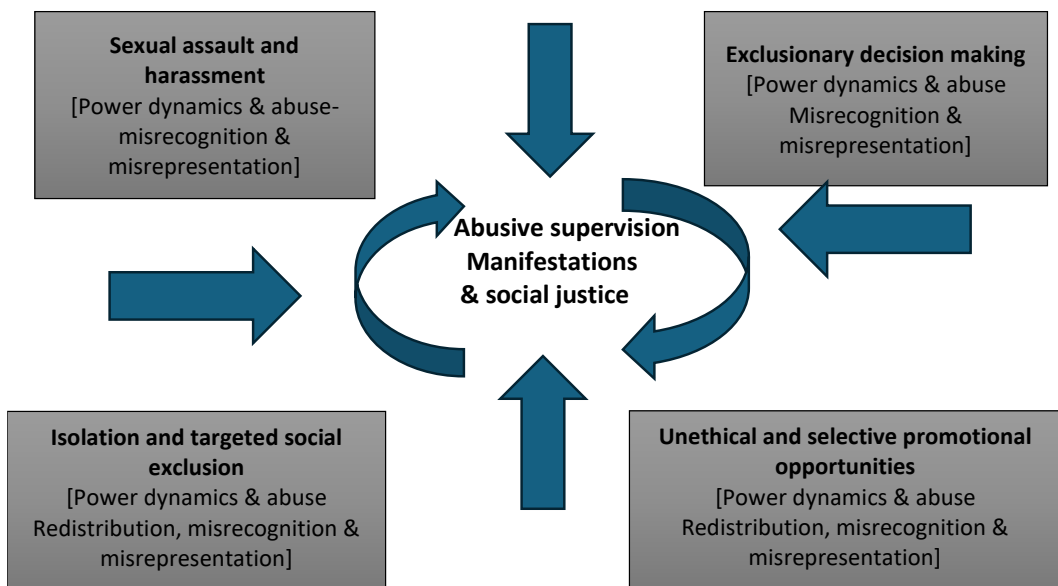
Rawls's (1971) familiarization of the conception of justice as fairness created interest in many scholars to pursue scientific discourses in rethinking what justice is in organizations. Amongst those leading the discourses include scholars such as Nancy Fraser and Miranda Fricker. This study deploys Nancy Frasers’ theory of social justice. Social justice theories and university education have a symbiotic relationship and are thus relevant and applicable in universities. Nancy Fraser is a notable feminist and American social justice feminist philosopher. In her three-dimensional comprehension of social justice, Fraser identifies three forms of justice, namely, redistributive justice (economic justice), representation justice (political dimension of justice), and recognition justice (cultural dimension of justice) (Fraser, 2000; Fraser, 2003; Dahl, Stoltz & Willig, 2004). The redistribution justice element has to do with organizational resources and how they are distributed to organizational employees. Representation is characterized by leaders’ ability to recognize that all employees belong to the organization and thus should be given audience and recognition. Recognition justice, according to Fraser (2003), focuses on identity politics and any perpetual, consistent, and targeted abuse towards subordinates in universities is misrecognition.

It has been established that acts of sexual abuse are prevalent in higher education spaces particularly universities (Lombardino, 2019; Tutchell & Edmonds, 2020). This form of abuse is extreme and can be characterized as an abuse of power where provocateurs (Abusive supervisors) display power imbalances. This power dynamic is uneven (supervisors are powerful and subordinates are powerless). The perpetrators use power as a resource (redistributive justice, Fraser, 2003) to abuse the victim. Leadership which takes part in these acts of injustice takes advantage of females who are vulnerable and trample on their rights and dignity. This form of injustice supports Frasers’ (2007) arguments in her work “Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition: A Two-dimensional Approach to gender justice”. I argue that supervisors who perpetrate these horrendous acts of abuse promote gender injustice.

Exclusionary decision-making making stated as a form of dominant abuse is also another salient form of leadership abuse and can be ascribed to the politics of misrecognition and misrepresentation. These forms of injustice are also symbols of power dynamics in that

leadership takes decisions solely and expects subordinates to comply without questioning. The same applies to deliberately isolating and deploying socially unjust and unfair practices of dissenting voices in the form of recruitment processes. This serves as a perfect example of the application of misrecognition (Fraser, 2007) which is a serious form of social injustice. Excluded employees feel isolated, rejected, and do not belong to the university in which they are employed. This paper also identified selected promotional opportunities as a form of abusive supervision. Promotion brings with it economic spin-offs for employees and failure to recognize and provide these opportunities to committed and deserving employees is unjust and unfair and borders on the failure to distribute economic resources fairly and justly as espoused by Fraser's redistributive justice in her theory.

Figure1: Interrelatedness of abusive supervision manifestations and Fraser's social justice



Source: author representation

5. Conclusion and recommendation

The purpose of this study was to explore the prevalence of abusive supervision in universities and the ramifications thereof. In examining this phenomenon, a rigorous evaluation of extant literature on abusive supervision was conducted. The process involved intensive analysis- synthesis of authoritative scholarly work related to the phenomenon of abusive supervision. Through the analysis and synthesis of related literature, I conclude that abusive supervision is prevalent in universities. These unjust and unfair practices manifest in different forms namely, sexual harassment, decision-making processes that are designed to exclude staff members, deliberate isolation of subordinates who challenge authority, and unethical and selective promotional

opportunities. I deployed the three-dimensional social justice theory (redistribution, recognition, and representation) of Nancy Fraser to frame this study. The findings of this conceptual study are significant in that it added to the theoretical epistemology on abusive supervision, particularly in universities. Since intensive analysis of the literature provided insights into the prevalent of abusive supervision and its dominant forms, the following recommendations are fundamental for universities to consider:

Despite indications that universities do have policies in dealing with sexual harassment of female staff members, I recommend that universities develop a sex offenders list and publicly publish the list with names of offenders. In embarking on this recommendation, university management should ensure that all legal aspects are observed and addressed. Regarding exclusionary decision-making, I recommend that individual universities ensure that they establish a genuine culture of democratic principles. This will also assist in ensuring that management accommodates dissenting voices and academic freedom is not suppressed. Regarding fair and just recruitment processes, universities should overemphasize the inclusion of external intervention with expertise in the recruitment of management vacancies in addition to the presence of labor representatives. I am of the view that these recommendations should not be viewed as a panacea and will not necessarily eliminate abuses but will assist in limiting and mitigating the unjust practices taking place in universities.

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