

# Abusive supervision climate and turnover intention: Is it my coworkers or my supervisor ostracizing me?

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## Abstract

**Aim:** The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationships between turnover intention and related constructs in an abusive supervision climate.

**Background:** An abusive supervision climate is a work environment that is affected by the negative attitudes of an abusive supervisor.

**Method:** The constructs are chosen in light of upper echelons theory and social learning theory. The snowball sampling method is used to reach the participants, and 230 nurses working in Turkish hospitals participated in this survey that measured abusive supervision, workplace incivility and ostracism. Pearson's correlation analysis and multiple and hierarchical linear regression analyses are carried out.

**Results:** The results suggested that abusive supervision, workplace incivility and workplace bullying have a positive effect on turnover intention as hypothesized. Abusive supervision has a significant and positive effect on workplace incivility and workplace bullying. The partial mediating effects of workplace bullying, workplace incivility and workplace ostracism on the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention are also confirmed.

**Conclusion:** The significant relationships and the nonsignificant relationship provided evidence for an abusive supervision climate.

**Implications for Nursing Management:** Top managers of the health care facilities should attempt to determine the abusive supervisors to manage the work environment and turnover intention of nurses.

## KEYWORDS

abusive supervision, turnover intention, workplace bullying, workplace incivility, workplace ostracism

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Abusive supervision can increase the turnover intention of the nurses (Lyu et al., 2019). Moreover, it has direct and indirect effects on many variables (Lim et al., 2020). These effects can decrease the organisational environmental performance (Chen et al., 2021) and change the climate of the organisation. Abusive supervision arises when supervisors tend to misuse their authority (Tepper, 2000). Abuse of authority reveals abusive supervision, which includes hostile

behaviours against a target employee or certain target employees. Managers exhibit a hostile attitude aiming to disturb or annoy the subordinates (Zellars & Tepper, 2002). This attitude may include extra workload given by the manager, discrediting the target employees and making the work-life of the target employees worse with different methods (Tepper, 2000).

When abusive supervision is perceived by most of the employees working in the same work environment, an abusive supervision climate occurs (Tahir & Khan, 2019). In an abusive supervision climate,

the employees readjust their behaviours and attitudes (Khan, 2017). The abusive supervision climate is shaped according to the abusive behaviours of the supervisors and the target employees (Priesemuth et al., 2014). Moreover, the character of the employees and their relationship with the target employees will play an important role in the shape of the abusive supervision climate. Some employees will prefer to be defensive, but some other employees will be more confident to be aggressive.

The abusive supervisors may determine an employee or a group of employees as a target, but together with the target employees, other employees who witness this situation will also be affected (Greenbaum et al., 2013). Abusive supervision means some employees are exposed to negative behaviours of a manager, and this negative situation will make other employees cautious (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Some employees will tend to take less risk, and some others will tend to change their behaviours to the target employee (Neves & Cunha, 2018). Employees will avoid having any connection with these employees. Because they will think like if they are accepted as a friend of these employees, they will also be abused. Apart from this, some other employees will tend to abuse the target employee due to their own reasons.

Supervisors have the power to change the behaviours, attitudes and emotional states of the employees negatively or positively (Greenbaum et al., 2013). Just like the other employees, nurses also tend to avoid doing the things disliked by their supervisors, and they tend to do the things requested by their supervisors. In this manner, an abusive supervisor gives the message that the target employee is disliked, and the other employees are requested to stay away from him or her. Moreover, a research showed that abusive supervisors affect the reactions of nurses to workplace mistreatment such as aggression and harassment (Zhang et al., 2021).

Abusive supervision encourages the employees who are hostile to the target employee. Furthermore, negative attitudes such as workplace incivility, workplace bullying and ostracism can be triggered by abusive supervision (Khan, 2017). Employees, who are eager to disturb the other employees, may tend to think like such abusive attitudes are acceptable when there is abusive supervision, because the behaviours of the managers are usually acceptable (Bamfo et al., 2018). Thus, abusive supervision climate is a reflection of the managers' abusive behaviours.

## 2 | CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

There can be many different kinds of mistreatment types and outcomes related to abusive supervision. But the model of this study is prepared by using workplace incivility, workplace bullying and workplace ostracism together with turnover intention. The relationships between these variables designed and commented in the perspective of upper echelons theory and social learning theory. According to upper echelons theory and social learning theory, all the chosen variables and the surveyed relationships are significant.

Social learning theory and upper echelons theory form the first two steps of abusive supervision climate. The first step is learning and awareness. While explaining the social learning theory, Bandura (1977) posits that learning from each other includes observation and modelling processes. The witnesses of abusive supervision will be aware of this behaviour, and they will learn it. The second step is imitating. Upper echelons theory claims that the employees accept the managers as a role model, and they imitate the behaviours of the managers. Abusive supervision is a remarkable attitude including various mistreatment behaviours of the managers, and employees tend to imitate this behaviour easily.

Upper echelon theory posits that the behaviour patterns of managers cannot be easily understood, but the observed behaviours of them can be imitated (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Therefore, this theory explains the second step of abusive supervision climate. Moreover, abusive supervision can be in many different forms depending on the personality of the manager. Incivil behaviours, bullying, aggressive behaviours and ostracism can be a part of abusive supervision. During the first step, the employees learn some parts of abusive supervision as they are expected to witness some of the abusive supervision behaviours.

Gregory et al. (2013) used social learning theory to explain abusive supervision. Mawritz et al. (2012) showed that social learning theory can also be used to examine the effects of abusive supervision on employee outcomes. According to social learning theory, individuals model the attitudes and behaviours of the people around them (Bandura, 1977). Gabler et al. (2014) mentioned that, from an organisational perspective, managers affect individuals, and witnesses of abusive supervision learn this behaviour; thus, how other mistreatment behaviours are triggered by abusive supervision can be explained by social learning theory. Hmieleskey and Ensley (2007) used upper echelons theory to explain abusive supervision. Brown et al. (2005) put emphasis on the tendency of subordinates to imitate the behaviours of their supervisors.

Erkutlu and Chafra (2014) explained workplace bullying by using social learning theory. The bullying behaviours of the managers are observed carefully and understood clearly in time. Hollis (2015) used upper echelons theory to provide a theoretical basis for understanding the term of workplace bullying. The bullying behaviours learned by the managers are imitated as the behaviours of the managers are accepted as preferred behaviours. Pynn (2016) suggested that workplace bullying of supervisors can be pervasive.

Taylor and Pattie (2014) revealed that the workplace incivility of subordinates is affected by the behaviours of the top managers. They also used social learning theory to explain this process. Social learning theory explains that employees witnessing workplace incivility may learn this behaviour, but the reason they start making incivil behaviours is that they think this kind of behaviour is accepted (Chen, 2018). Martinez and Eisenberger (2004) discussed the relationship between workplace incivility and top management. They mentioned that the incivil behaviours of top managers are imitated. Zhou et al. (2019) claimed that such incivil behaviours can be triggered by some other mistreatment behaviours.

Workplace ostracism is also learned by witnessing, and this is the observation process of social learning theory (Rudert et al., 2019,

p. 164). Drawing on insights from social learning theory, Christensen-Saleem et al. (2020) developed a model to survey the relationship between certain leadership behaviours and workplace ostracism. This model showed that if the supervisors have a lack of ethical behaviours, workplace ostracism will be increasing.

Turnover intention is chosen as the dependent variable of this research, and abusive supervision is an antecedent (Wongledee, 2020). There are many studies suggesting that abusive supervision is an antecedent of turnover intention, and its impact on turnover intention is positive (Arif et al., 2017; Bamfo et al., 2018; Lyu et al., 2019; Mathieu & Babiak, 2016; Pradhan & Jena, 2018). According to the results of many studies, workplace incivility is another predictor of turnover intention, and it has a positive effect on turnover intention (Dion, 2006; Huang & Lin, 2019; Mahfooz et al., 2017; Rahim & Cosby, 2016; Sharma & Singh, 2016).

Some other researches have shown that workplace bullying is also a predictor of turnover intention, and the effect of workplace bullying on turnover intention is positive (Ahmad & Kaleem, 2020; Bohle et al., 2017; Coetzee & Dyk, 2018; Hsieh et al., 2019; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Rosario-Hernández et al., 2018). Many academicians suggested that workplace ostracism has a positive effect on turnover intention (Lyu et al., 2019; Mahfooz et al., 2017; Miner et al., 2019; Turkoglu & Dalgic, 2019).

The results of the previous studies showed that abusive supervision increases workplace bullying (Kemper, 2016; Tepper, 2007), workplace incivility (Zhou et al., 2019) and workplace ostracism (Khan, 2017). Priesemuth et al. (2014) claimed that abusive supervision can affect some other variables simultaneously and create an abusive supervision climate.

The conceptual relationships are shown in the research model in Figure 1. This research model indicated that some mediating effects can be surveyed. It is claimed that the effects of abusive supervision on workplace incivility and workplace ostracism can cause some indirect effects of abusive supervision on another variables (Khan, 2017;

Zhou et al., 2019). This claim is supported by suggesting mediating effects regarding abusive supervision. Consequently, the mediating effect of workplace bullying, workplace incivility and workplace ostracizing on the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention will be tested. Therefore, the hypotheses will be prepared as below:

**H1.** Abusive supervision/workplace bullying/workplace ostracism has a positive effect on turnover intention.

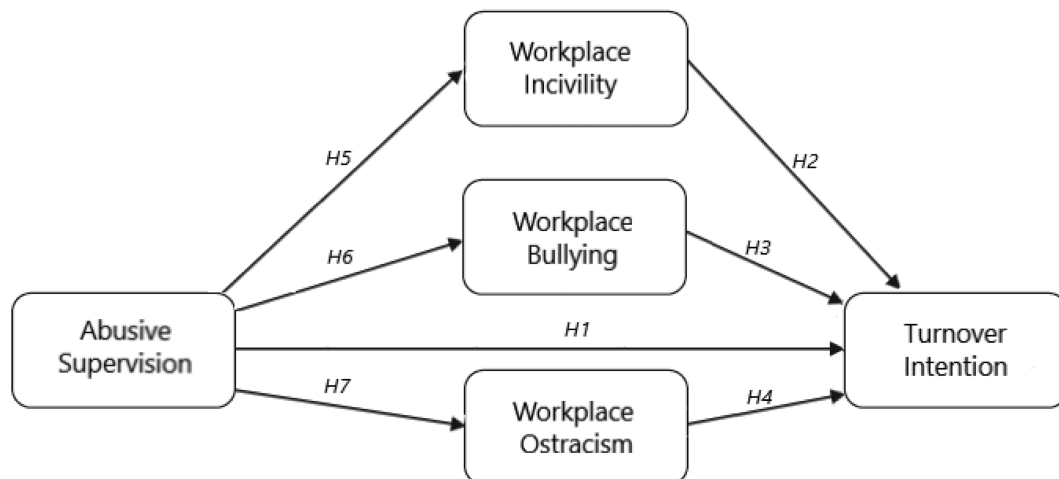
**H2.** Abusive supervision has a positive effect on workplace bullying/workplace incivility/workplace ostracism.

**H3.** Workplace incivility/workplace bullying/workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 | Sample and measuring

The sampling of this study is formed by using the snowball sampling method. This nonprobability sampling method is reaching the nurses who are not afraid to declare that they have an abusive supervisor. Because it is observed that some nurses are anxious to fill the parts of the questionnaire including the questions regarding abusive supervision. Some of them did not want to fill the questionnaire, and some of them asked whether who they are will be declared. Only the nurses who wanted to contribute to the abusive supervision literature and who are confident that their names or any proof regarding who they are will not be declared participated in this survey.



**FIGURE 1** Research model

The questionnaires were sent to the e-mails of 470 nurses working in public hospitals of Istanbul. The author could reach 220 nurses and 209 of them provided usable information for this survey. Response rate was 46.8%. A total of 19,357 nurses were employed in public hospitals in 2019 in Istanbul (TUIK, 2010). The sample adequacy was tested by using G\*Power (3.1.9.7) software that is used with this purpose. Multiple linear regression and .05 level of significance were chosen. The proposed total sample size was 111, and it showed that the sample size was adequate (Faul et al., 2009).

The five-item scale of Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) is used to measure active aggressive abusive supervision. This scale is derived from the 15-item scale of Tepper (2000). This scale is translated into Turkish by Ülbeği et al. (2014).

Four-item scale of Matthews and Ritter (2016) is used to measure workplace incivility. This scale is derived from the 12-item scale of Cortina et al. (2013), which is translated into Turkish by Kanten (2014). Four-item EAPA-T-R scale of Escartin et al. (2017), the short version of 12-item EAPA-T scale of Escartin et al. (2010), is used to measure workplace bullying. These questions are translated into Turkish by Tatar et al. (2017).

Workplace ostracism has been measured through the 10-item scale of Ferris et al. (2008). Turkish version of the questions is prepared by Abası and Ozdemir (2019). Four-item scale of Bluedorn (1982), which is translated into Turkish by Büte (2011), is used to measure turnover intention.

### 3.2 | Statistical analysis

The statistical analyses of this study were performed by using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software. Factor analysis is carried out at first to determine the dimensionality of each construct, and the results indicated that the proposed constructs are unidimensional. The results were over the recommended threshold value, which is 0.6 (Hair et al., 2006). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) analysis results suggested that the items were appropriate for confirmatory factor analysis.

The Pearson correlation test was carried out to detect the relationships between the chosen variables. The relationships between abusive supervision and the other constructs and the relationships between the chosen constructs and turnover intentions are analysed by performing hierarchical linear regression and multiple linear regression techniques. The mediating analysis results are supported with Sobel test results.

## 4 | RESULTS

Cronbach alpha (CR) values of all the constructs are over .70, which is accepted to be the threshold (Nunnally, 1967). Table 1 indicates the relationships between abusive supervision and the other constructs. All the relationships between abusive supervision and other variables are significant. Abusive supervision has a positive and significant effect on each variable.

Table 2 shows the relationships between turnover intention and the other constructs. According to the analysis results, workplace bullying and abusive supervision have a positive effect on turnover intention at .05 level of significance. The effect of workplace incivility on turnover intention is positive and significant at the level of .05. The effect of workplace ostracism is positive but not significant at the level of .05. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values are below 4.0; therefore, there was not any proof regarding multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2006).

The results showed that it is possible to see mediating effect between the chosen variables. The mediating analysis results indicated that there is a partial mediating effect between the chosen variables. The analysis results are in Table 3. The partial mediating effect is determined as the correlation between the independent and dependent variables decreased when mediator variable is added.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

This study aimed to elaborate the relationships between the constructs in abusive supervision climate among the nurses. The constructs related to abusive supervision climate are used in this study, and their relationships with abusive supervision and turnover intention are surveyed. According to the analysis results, only the significance of the relationship between workplace ostracism and turnover intention is not confirmed, but all the other hypothesized relationships are significant, and the hypotheses are supported.

**TABLE 1** Regression analysis results related to abusive supervision

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Beta	t	R <sup>2</sup>	Sig.	VIF
Abusive supervision	Workplace bullying	.216	3.180	.047	.002	1.052
	Workplace incivility	.439	7.028	.193	.000	1.239
	Workplace ostracism	.668	12.902	.446	.000	1.805
	Turnover intention	.371	5.747	.133	.000	1.140

Abbreviation: VIF, variance inflation factor.

**TABLE 2** Regression analysis results related to turnover intention

Independent variable	Beta	t	Sig.
Workplace bullying	.256	2.976	.003
Workplace incivility	.118	0.868	.0096
Workplace ostracism	.065	1.674	.0386
Abusive supervision	.166	2.620	.009
VIF = 1.2263	R <sup>2</sup>	.208	
	F	13.399	
	Sig.	.000	

**TABLE 3** The mediating analysis results

Variables	Beta	t	Sig.	R <sup>2</sup>	F	Sig.
Abusive supervision	.294	3.993	.000*			
Workplace ostracism	.198	2.69	.008*			
Dependent variable: turnover intention				.154	18.749	.000
Abusive supervision	.285	4.032	.000*			
Workplace incivility	.196	2.767	.006*			
Dependent variable: turnover intention				.169	20.875	.000
Abusive supervision	.321	4.995	.000*			
Workplace bullying	.231	3.600	.000*			
Dependent variable: turnover intention				.189	23.948	.000

The results of previous studies supported the effect of workplace ostracism on turnover intention (Lyu et al., 2019; Mahfooz et al., 2017; Miner et al., 2019; Turkoglu & Dalgic, 2019), but the results of this study did not confirm this finding. The other studies were conducted in different industries. The industry this study was conducted in may be the reason for such a difference.

As suggested by the previous studies, abusive supervision has a significant and positive effect on turnover intention (Arif et al., 2017; Bamfo et al., 2018; Mathieu & Babiak, 2016; Pradhan & Jena, 2018). The significant and positive effect of workplace incivility on the turnover intention that was revealed by this study was also confirmed by the previous studies (Dion, 2006; Huang & Lin, 2019; Rahim & Cosby, 2016; Sharma & Singh, 2016).

The analysis results showed that workplace bullying has a positive and significant effect on turnover intention, and these results are in line with the other studies (Bohle et al., 2017; Coetzee & Dyk, 2018; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Rosario-Hernández et al., 2018). This research suggested that workplace ostracism has a positive and significant effect on turnover intention just like some other studies (Lyu et al., 2019; Mahfooz et al., 2017; Miner et al., 2019; Turkoglu & Dalgic, 2019).

To the best of our knowledge, the partial mediating effect of workplace bullying, workplace incivility and workplace ostracism on the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention was determined for the first time. Some nurses explained that the existence of an abusive supervisor encourages the employees who want to bully others. Mathieu and Babiak (2016) called this situation 'corporate psychopathy.' Especially the target employees harassed by the abusive supervisors are bullied more than the others because bullies accept them to be more vulnerable as other employees avoid protecting them. Pynn (2016) claimed that the characteristic of being contagious is significant for workplace bullying. This study confirmed that this behaviour is related to abusive supervision and turnover intention.

Workplace incivility mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention. It increases the workplace incivility affecting turnover intention. The reason of this situation can be the employees who were the target of abusive supervision. The other employees also avoid being kind to the target employees. Because

being kind to the target employees may be understood like they are friends with them by the abusive supervisors. The nurses do not prefer to be friends with the target employees as they believe that this situation can bring the negative attitude of the abusive supervisors. Consequently, workplace incivility can also become a common behaviour that increases after abusive supervision as claimed (Zhou et al., 2019).

This study confirmed the concept of abusive supervision climate. Moreover, it indicated how abusive supervision climate occurs among the nurses. The results revealed in this study contribute to the literature in several ways.

First, this study suggests that abusive supervision can affect the perceptions of the employees and can cause an abusive supervision climate. The partial mediating effects of workplace incivility, workplace ostracism and workplace bullying are indicators of abusive supervision climate. Abusive supervision can trigger or increase workplace incivility, workplace ostracism and workplace bullying in a work environment.

Second, the impact of workplace ostracism on turnover intention is not direct, but with the existence of abusive supervision, the indirect effect of workplace ostracism on turnover intention is revealed. This situation is a stronger indicator of an abusive supervision climate. The participants mentioned that they ignore behaviours related to workplace ostracism or they do not think these behaviours aim to ostracize them, but when there is an abusive supervisor, they are more alert, and they notice the aforementioned behaviours more than before. In other words, they become more offensive to workplace ostracism with the increase of abusive supervision. But, the employees may also tend to ostracize the nurses who were targets of the abusive supervisory behaviour due to many different reasons. For example, they may avoid seeming to be a friend of such nurses to protect themselves from abusive supervisory behaviours.

Consequently, the results of this study revealed that some constructs such as workplace ostracism are significantly affected by abusive supervision. Such constructs can create an abusive supervision climate together when there is abusive supervision. The supervisors can start an abusive supervision climate and increase the turnover intention of a nurse. This climate includes more workplace incivility, workplace ostracism and workplace bullying triggered by the abusive

supervisors that may increase the turnover intention of the nurses. Abusive supervisors encourage such mistreatments deliberately or involuntarily in a work environment. For example, the nurses avoid communicating with the employees who are the targets of abusive supervisors, and this increases workplace ostracism. Additionally, the victims feel more vulnerable against such mistreatments when there is abusive supervision, and they tend to quit.

## 5.1 | Limitations and future plans

Future studies can determine some more constructs affecting abusive supervision climate. Moreover, future studies can elaborate on how abusive supervisors working as top managers can turn other managers into abusive supervisors. This process can show the details of an abusive supervision climate.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Abusive supervision has a significant effect on workplace incivility, workplace bullying, workplace ostracism and turnover intention. Workplace incivility and workplace bullying also have a significant effect on turnover intention. But the relationship between workplace ostracism and turnover intention is not significant. Moreover, workplace incivility, workplace bullying and workplace ostracism mediate the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intention partially.

## 7 | THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

According to the results, workplace ostracism does not have a significant effect on turnover intention together with workplace incivility and workplace bullying. But when there is abusive supervision, workplace ostracism affects turnover intention significantly. The participants explained that they usually do not think like they are ostracized. Especially when there is workplace bullying and workplace incivility, it is easier to find reasons for ostracizing behaviours of the other nurses than the bullying and incivil behaviours. For example, some nurses think that the other nurses were friends with each other and they had personal topics to talk about, and that is why they stay away from them. Another nurse mentioned that the personality of the individuals can be the reason of ostracism. Most of them hardly thought that they are the target of ostracism. However, when there is an abusive supervisor, workplace ostracism became more disturbing for the nurses. Some of them started to think that their supervisor is the reason for workplace ostracism.

Sometimes abusive supervisors can start workplace ostracism. The nurses do not want to be seen together with the employee who is the target of the abusive supervisor. Because they perceive that being a friend of them can also be the reason for the

negative attitudes of abusive supervisors. After detecting the target of abusive supervision, the other employees may start workplace ostracism deliberately or neglectfully because they did not want to spend time with someone targeted by the supervisor.

The results of this study confirmed the contagious effects of abusive supervision climate elaborated by Khan (2017). Especially workplace ostracism is learned and imitated by monitoring (Rudert et al., 2019). Thus, spillover effect of workplace ostracism can be more than workplace bullying and workplace incivility as explained above.

## 7.1 | Implications for nursing management

The turnover intention of nurses became more important nowadays as the shortage of nurses is increasing. The management policies aiming to decrease turnover intention should focus on the variables that will have the highest impact on turnover intention. Abusive supervision is not the strongest antecedent of turnover intention, but it has a great impact on turnover intention as it can start an abusive supervision climate. This study provided evidence for the abusive supervision climate and showed the variables taking place in an abusive supervision climate. This information can guide the human resource managers aiming to determine an effective policy to decrease the turnover intention of nurses.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

No funding is received.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was not necessary.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Author elects to not share data.

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**How to cite this article:** Özkan, A. H. (2022). Abusive supervision climate and turnover intention: Is it my coworkers or my supervisor ostracizing me? *Journal of Nursing Management*, 30(6), 1462–1469. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jonm.13398>