

## ABUSIVE SUPERVISION AND EMPLOYEES' JOB PERFORMANCE: A MULTIPLE MEDIATION MODEL

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We explored the relationship between abusive supervision (AS) and employee job performance (EJP) by conducting a survey of a group of employees ( $N = 630$ ) of Chinese public and private companies. We investigated possible mediation in the relationship by leadership justice, supervisory trust, and self-efficacy from three perspectives, namely, self-concept and individual socialization, organizational justice, and leader–member exchange. The results showed that there was a negative relationship between AS and EJP that was mediated by leadership justice, supervisory trust, and self-efficacy. We also found that the negative relationship between AS and EJP was affected by the joint mediating effect of leadership justice and supervisory trust. Implications for academicians and practitioners are discussed.

*Keywords:* abusive supervision, leadership justice, supervisory trust, self-efficacy, job performance.

*Abusive supervision* (AS) has been defined as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Due to the significant negative effects of AS, research interest in this topic has increased over the past 15 years. Tepper (2000) reported that AS affected more than 13% of the U.S. workforce, and there is considerable evidence that

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such behavior has a severe psychological impact on employees, which manifests as reduced affective commitment of the employee to the employing organization (Babatunde, 2013), a less positive perception of organizational justice (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008), reduced wellbeing (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012), increased emotional exhaustion (Wheeler, Halbesleben, & Whitman, 2013), increased turnover (Rodwell, Brunetto, Demir, Shacklock, & Farr-Wharton, 2014), and counterproductive behavior (Wei & Si, 2013). Although the findings reported in extant research have substantially enhanced understanding of the negative consequences of AS, these have not yet been fully elaborated. The focus in most research on mechanisms acting as mediators in the effects of AS has been on individual emotional and cognitive processes (e.g., Henle & Gross, 2014; Wheeler et al., 2013); markedly less work has been done on the combined effects of perceptions of organizational justice, leader–member exchange (LMX), and self-concept of employees' on employees' job performance (EJP). The voice of organizational authority leaders is the main determinant of employees' perceptions of their working environment, which contains factors at three levels: organization, leader–member relationship, and self-concept. These perceptions may work together to affect EJP. Therefore, in our study we explored the mechanisms underlying AS from these three perspectives.

Moreover, understanding the role of cultural factors is critical to understanding the mechanisms of AS, because employees' cultural values are an important influence on how they react to processes and conditions in the work environment (Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013). For example, scholars have indicated that employees holding the authority orientation in a high-power-distance culture are more sensitive to AS when compared with those in a low-power-distance culture (Lin et al., 2013). We, therefore, explored the relationship between AS and EJP from the three perspectives we have described in a Chinese cultural setting.

In organizational justice theory, it is emphasized that as leaders are an embodiment of the organization, leadership justice is the most important element of organizational justice (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007). In LMX theory it is contended that, because of constraints on time and energy, a leader can interact well with only a few subordinates, who may thus gain more opportunity to obtain resources and benefits than do the other subordinates (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). This implies that employees in relationship- and authority-orientated cultural contexts (such as China), compared to those in Western cultures, are more proactive in establishing a relationship with a leader who has a decisive role in the employees' access to available resources and benefits, and a leader certainly has reciprocal obligations with his/her employees. In such a context, comparing the quality of the leader–member relationship (i.e., high LMX and close relationship; low LMX and distant relationship) will become meaningful for the employee and will affect his or her perception of leadership

justice. Thus, we argued that employees involved in reciprocal leader–member relationships would have an implicit expectation of justice, and employees who experience AS may have a negative perception of justice and may respond to this unbalanced supervisor–subordinate relationship through a decline in the quality of their job performance.

*Trust* is defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.” (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). Trust is central to the supervisor–employee relationship because of the voluntary nature of social exchange and the uncertainty of return (Mushonga, Thiagarajan, & Torrance, 2014). In their theoretical framework Dirks and Ferrin (2002) posit links between leadership behavior, trust, and employee reactions. According to this theory, good supervisor–employee relationships promote employee trust in supervisors and, thus, encourage a positive attitude to the job among employees, and reduce the incidence of their negative organizational behavior. It is recognized that AS is a negative form of leadership behavior embodying poor LMX relationships that reduces high trust expectations and increases negative behavior outcomes (see e.g., Han, Peng, & Zhu, 2012; Hollensbe, Khazanchi, & Masterson, 2008). Therefore, based on the related research, we decided to explore the mediating effect of supervisory trust on the relationship between AS and EJP.

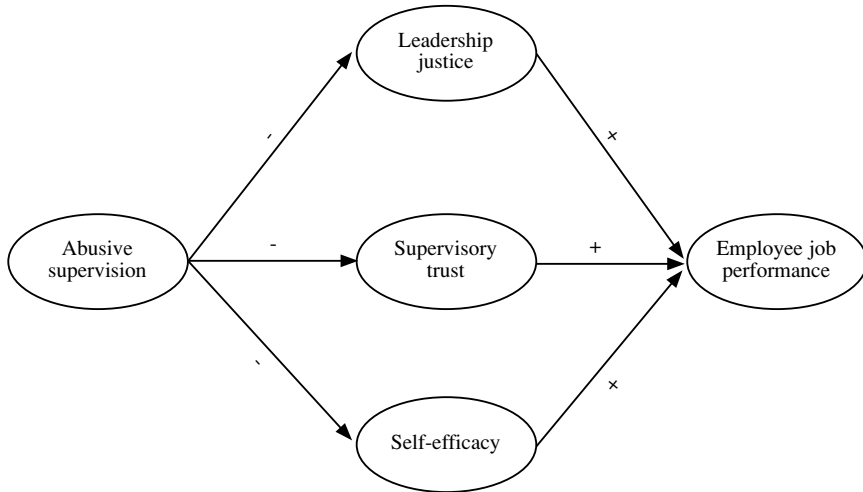
*Self-efficacy* refers to one’s personal estimation of one’s ability to handle a specific behavior (Bandura, 2004). Individual self-efficacy, the most important concept in Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, can explain individual behavioral changes; it has been suggested that behavior is directly influenced by self-concept (Hsu, Yu, Lou, & Eng, 2015). *Self-concept* is defined as “the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings with reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p.7). In Mead’s (1934) work on self-concept and individual socialization theory, it has been argued that significant others have an important effect on an individual’s self-concept during the process of individual socialization (Mead, 1934). We argued that, in their role as representatives of the organization, leaders should be considered as significant others who play an important role in the development of employees’ self-concept. Therefore, an abusive supervisor’s negative attitude and destructive behavior would constitute negative social evaluation and may undermine employees’ positive self-concept as well as reducing their perception of self-efficacy and adversely affecting their performance at work.

In the context of our research, we noted that the focus of previous research on self-concept has mainly been on family and school contexts and little attention has been paid to interpersonal interactions in the workplace; the existence of this gap encouraged us to extend our exploration of the theoretical basis of the

AS–EJP association. Thus we designed this study to explore how an abusive supervisor, acting as a significant other, influences employees psychologically and impacts their organizational behavior, and also to investigate the potential mediating role of self-efficacy in the AS–EJP linkage.

Taking all these aims together, we proposed a three-way mediation model, which is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Theoretical model.*



## Theory and Hypotheses

### Abusive Supervision and Employee Job Performance

There is agreement in existing theory and research findings that AS is the main manifestation of hostile leadership in organizational contexts where the focus is on the treatment of subordinates (e.g., Li, Hua, & Gao, 2013; Zhu, Duan, & Lin, 2009), and that abusive behavior has a negative impact on EJP. Social exchange theorists have argued that employees subjected to AS will respond by reducing the quality of their performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007), and additionally there are studies in which the findings show that AS is negatively related to subordinates' task performance (e.g., Decoster, Camps, Stouten, Vandevyvere, & Tripp, 2013) and organizational citizenship behavior (Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2011). We were in accord with earlier social exchange research (Harris et al., 2007), in which AS is described as a form of destructive and unequal social exchange within an organization, and, on the basis of this description, we suggested that employees may respond to AS by reducing the

quality of their job performance in an effort to alleviate the negative effect of the unfair treatment.

**Hypothesis 1:** Abusive supervision will be negatively associated with employees' job performance.

### **Leadership Justice as a Mediator**

According to organizational justice theory, leadership justice is the most important element of organizational justice (Cropanzano et al., 2007). Leadership justice consists of procedural justice and interactional justice (Mushonga et al., 2014). *Leadership procedural justice* encompasses employees' perceptions of how fairly a supervisor implements policies and procedures and makes decisions (Yang, Mossholder, & Peng, 2009). *Leadership interactional justice* refers to the degree to which subordinates perceive that the leader treats employees with politeness, dignity, and respect (Bies & Moag, 1986). Findings in numerous studies indicate that leadership justice affects subordinates' organizational commitment, job satisfaction, organizational support, and in-role performance (e.g., DeConick, 2010; Li, Yu, Yang, Qi, & Fu, 2014). In traditional Chinese culture, the perception of leadership justice amounts to more than a general sense of procedural and interpersonal justice; it also encompasses the subordinates' respect for their leaders as the embodiment of organizational authority (Liu, Long, & Li, 2003). Thus, employees in China may be more sensitive to their supervisor's attitudes and behavior than are their counterparts in the West, perceive AS as their supervisor's unfairness, and respond by reducing the level of their in-role performance.

**Hypothesis 2:** Abusive supervision will be negatively associated with employees' job performance and this relationship will be mediated by the subordinates' perception of leadership justice.

### **Supervisory Trust as a Mediator**

A common element of definitions of *supervisory trust*—which is considered central to institutional and interpersonal relationships—is that it entails behavior that reflects the individual's vulnerability to the other person in an exchange relationship (e.g., Dirks & Ferrin 2002; Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2006). According to social exchange theory, supervisory trust is affected by the quality of the LMX (e.g., Han et al., 2012; Hollensbe et al., 2008) and has an influence on EJP (Mushonga et al., 2014). Findings in studies have shown that AS undermines employees' trust in supervisors and that subsequently the employees' task performance worsens and fewer organizational citizenship behaviors are performed (Wu, Liu, & Liu, 2009). In the light of these findings, we therefore posited that an employee who is experiencing AS may have a low level of trust in that supervisor, which, in turn, would reduce EJP.

**Hypothesis 3:** Abusive supervision will be negatively associated with employees' job performance and this relationship will be mediated by the employees' supervisory trust.

### **Leadership Justice and Supervisory Trust as Joint Mediators**

Leadership justice and supervisory trust are both important indicators of employees' perceptions of a supervisor and, thus, to some extent they reflect the quality of LMX (e.g., Mushonga et al., 2014; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Lewicki, Wiethoff, and Tomlinson (2005) emphasized the complexity of the justice–trust interface and recommended that researchers should explore their association in the context of the social relationship. Hence, in the current study our aim was to explore the relationship between leadership justice and supervisory trust based on the supervisor and subordinate dyad. We predicted that AS would violate the fairness principle of social exchange in the organization and, thus, might cause the employees to have a negative perception of leadership justice, which might, in turn, affect employees' perceptions of supervisory trust via emotional transmission, leading eventually to reduced EJP.

**Hypothesis 4:** Leadership justice and supervisory trust will have combined mediating effects on the relationship between abusive supervision and employee job performance.

### **Self-efficacy as a Mediator**

It has been posited that individual self-efficacy is directly influenced by self-concept (Hsu et al., 2015). In theoretical work on self-concept and individual socialization theory, it is suggested that there are numerous significant others involved in the process of an individual's socialization, and that these other people have important effects on the development of individual self-concept (Mead, 1934). Employees may regard their supervisor as a significant other because of the supervisor's role in the organization, and the employees' perceptions of their own value and ability may be influenced indirectly by their supervisor's attitudes. Consequently, as a significant other, when a supervisor is abusive, this situation may lead an employee to doubt his or her ability, and, consequently, this may reduce his or her self-efficacy and may impact his or her job performance. Thus we hypothesized as follows:

**Hypothesis 5:** Abusive supervision will be negatively associated with employees' job performance and this relationship will be mediated by employee self-efficacy.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

Our sample comprised men and women ( $N = 630$ , 56% of respondents were men and 44% were women) employed in public and private Chinese companies

located in south China. Their mean age was 25 years ( $SD = 2.86$ ). Participants provided data via online surveys that they completed on several different occasions. The participants who were employed in the public organizations were drawn mainly from students at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in the course of study for a Master of Public Administration and their coworkers, and the data obtained from employees working for private companies were collected with the help of human resources managers who prepared lists of randomly selected employees. The items in the surveys consisted of measures of respondents' perceptions of self-efficacy, supervisory trust, leadership justice, and job performance. Respondents rated the extent to which they perceived that the supervisor abused them. The survey was completed during working hours. Of the 680 participants who completed surveys, 630 returned valid survey forms (effective rate of return = 93%).

### Measures

We followed Brislin's (1980) back-translation procedure to translate abusive supervision, supervisory trust, and self-efficacy items from English into Chinese. The translators were students majoring in social psychology or English.

**Abusive supervision.** AS was measured using a 15-item scale adapted from Tepper (2000), which has been repeatedly validated by Chinese scholars such as Liu, Wu, and Lin (2009), and Yan and Pei (2013). A sample item is "My manager makes fun of me" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Leadership justice.** Leadership justice was measured using a six-item scale taken from work by Liu and colleagues (2003). A sample item is "The leaders are not prejudiced against me" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Supervisory trust.** The supervisory trust items comprised an 11-item scale developed by McAllister (1995). A sample item is "The supervisor and I have a very good relationship. We can easily share our feelings and thoughts" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Warner, Gutiérrez-Doña, Villegas Angulo, and Schwarzer (2015). A sample item is "I find it easy to live up to my ideals and achieve goals" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Employee job performance.** EJP was assessed using a 16-item scale taken from work by Han and Liao (2007). A sample item is "I complete the tasks that I have been assigned" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

## Results

### Common Method Variance

We used the Harman single-factor method to assess common method variance for AS, supervisory trust, self-efficacy, leadership justice, and EJP based on

exploratory factor analysis of 58 items. We obtained nine characteristic values that were greater than 1, which accounted for 65.12% of the total variance; the explained variance of the first principal component accounted for 25.99%, which was below half the total explained variance. These results suggest that common method variance is unlikely to have biased the main results.

### Reliability and Validity of the Scales

Reliability of indices was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The result shows that values of Cronbach's alpha for AS ( $\alpha = .831$ ), leadership justice ( $\alpha = .949$ ), supervisory trust ( $\alpha = .877$ ), self-efficacy ( $\alpha = .865$ ), and EJP ( $\alpha = .941$ ) were all greater than .80, which indicates acceptable reliability. Moreover, using root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and comparative fit index (CFI) as our criteria to perform confirmatory factor analysis, we verified the validity of AS ( $\chi^2/df = 1.695$ , RMSEA = .050, GFI = .946, AGFI = .905, TLI = .985, CFI = .985); leadership justice ( $\chi^2/df = 2.995$ , RMSEA = .080, GFI = .969, AGFI = .907, TLI = .988, CFI = .988); supervisory trust ( $\chi^2/df = 2.680$ , RMSEA = .079, GFI = .966, AGFI = .931, TLI = .940, CFI = .939), self-efficacy ( $\chi^2/df = 2.728$ , RMSEA = .078, GFI = .951, AGFI = .903, TLI = .959, CFI = .958); and EJP ( $\chi^2/df = 2.734$ , RMSEA = .068, GFI = .958, AGFI = .902, TLI = .956, CFI = .956). Each variable meets the goodness-of-fit criteria of relative  $\chi^2$  ( $\chi^2/df$ ) less than 3, RMSEA of less than .08 and GFI, AGFI, CFI, and TLI values of more than .90 (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008), and the five-factor model we evaluated with the addition of the criterion of normed fit index (NFI), had a good fit ( $\chi^2 = 626.921$ ,  $df = 239$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.62$ , RMSEA = .060, GFI = .900, NFI = .901, TLI = .930, CFI = .920).

### Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Results verified by the analysis of variance indicate that neither gender, age, nor education had a statistically significant effect on employees' perception of AS, leadership justice, supervisory trust, self-efficacy, or EJP ( $p > .05$ ). The results showed that AS ( $F = 27.093$ ,  $p < .000$ ), leadership justice ( $F = 19.244$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supervisory trust ( $F = 29.342$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and self-efficacy ( $F = .544$ ,  $p < .001$ ) all affected EJP. Measured in terms of Cohen's  $d$  (Cohen, 1998), AS ( $d = .648$ ), leadership justice ( $d = .523$ ), and supervisory trust ( $d = .659$ ) all had a moderate effect on EJP, and self-efficacy ( $d = 1.053$ ) had a large effect on EJP.

Results are presented in Table 1 as means, standard deviations, and pairwise correlations between measured variables. AS was negatively correlated with supervisory trust, self-efficacy, leadership justice, and employee job performance, whereas EJP was positively correlated with supervisory trust, self-efficacy, and leadership justice.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Dimension/ Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Abusive supervision	1.77	.784	1						
2. Emotional trust	3.43	.823	-.350**	1					
3. Cognitive trust	3.93	.820	-.313**	.711**	1				
4. Self-efficacy	3.48	.597	-.231**	.373**	.342**	1			
5. Leadership justice	3.55	.894	-.359**	.493**	.483**	.373**	1		
6. Task performance	4.03	.773	-.318**	.291**	.289**	.466**	.457**	1	
7. Relationship performance	4.01	.710	-.311**	.376**	.285**	.479**	.478**	.841**	1

Note. *N* = 630. \*\* *p* < .01 (two-tailed).

**Hypothesis Testing**

We tested the direct effect of AS on EJP using structural equation modeling. The result showed that AS had a negative effect on EJP ( $\beta = -.32, p < .01$ ). Indices of fit indicated that the model was an excellent fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 521.5, df = 175, \chi^2/df = 2.98, GFI = .92, NFI = .91, RMSEA = .058$ ). Therefore Hypothesis 1 was supported.

We assessed mediation of the relationship between AS and EJP by leadership justice (Hypothesis 2, Hypothesis 4), by supervisory trust (Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 4), and by self-efficacy (Hypothesis 5) using Amos 17.0. The results showed that leadership justice ( $\beta = -.39, p < .01; \beta = .26, p < .01$ ), supervisory trust ( $\beta = -.26, p < .01; \beta = .11, p < .01$ ), and self-efficacy ( $\beta = -.32, p < .01; \beta = .70, p < .01$ ) all mediated the relationship between AS and EJP; the indirect effect values were .101, .029, and .224, respectively, which indicates that all three variables were mediators in the association between AS and EJP.

The test of mediation also indicated that leadership justice had a positive effect on supervisory trust ( $\beta = .49, p < .01$ ), which indicates that leadership justice and supervisory trust had a combined mediating effect in the relationship between AS and EJP ( $\beta = -.39, p < .01; \beta = .49, p < .01; \beta = .11, p < .01$ ). The indirect effect was .021. Fit indices, including incremental and relative fit indices (IFI and RFI) also indicated that the model was an excellent fit ( $\chi^2 = 2511.226, df = 1517, \chi^2/df = 1.642, GFI = .907, AGFI = .900, CFI = .927, IFI = .927, RFI = .918, TLI = .920, RMSEA = .048$ ) and generalized  $R^2$  was .56. Therefore, Hypotheses 2, 3, 4, and 5 were supported.

**Discussion**

We explored the inner mechanism of the effect of AS on EJP in a Chinese cultural setting. Our findings extend those of previous research on the negative effect of leadership behavior on employees' organizational behavior by showing

that AS was negatively related to EJP among our Chinese respondents. We corroborated findings in earlier research showing that negative leadership behavior has an adverse impact on employees' ability to cope with work tasks (e.g., Harris et al., 2007; Jian, Kwan, Qiu, Liu, & Yim, 2012). Hostility and destructiveness are core aspects of AS and, whatever the motivation behind it, we found that AS has a direct, negative impact on the supervisor–employee relationship. If an employee has to expend time and energy dealing with interpersonal issues in the supervisory relationship rather than focusing on his or her work tasks, a decline in job performance is inevitable (Harris et al., 2007). In respect to the negative feedback that results from a low quality of supervisor–employee relationship (e.g., Decoster et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2009), an employee experiencing AS may perform poorly in retaliation for the low quality of LMX.

Our findings also suggest that the negative impact of AS on EJP is mediated via the interaction of multiple factors related to employees' perceptions of leadership justice, supervisory trust, and self-efficacy, which agrees with the view that a low quality of LMX relationship has an adverse effect on a variety of task-related psychological and behavior motivations across an employee's career (see e.g., Davies, Wong, & Laschinger, 2011; Rich et al., 2010). The psychological determinants that are critical in the leader–subordinate relationship are leadership justice and supervisory trust (DeConick, 2010; Mushonga et al., 2014); however, AS violates the principle of reciprocal LMX (Dansereau et al., 1975) and creates an unbalanced and uncertain supervisor–subordinate relationship, which results in a working environment in which employees perceive they are being treated unfairly, and in which there is a lack of trust. Moreover, unlike Yan and Pei's (2013) research, which was based on social exchange theory and conservation of resources theory, our research was based on Mead's (1934) theory of self-concept and individual socialization, and our aim was to clarify how supervisors, functioning as significant others, influence employees' self-efficacy. In Mead's (1934) theoretical work on self-concept and individual socialization, he identified that a supervisor acts as a significant other and, hence, has an important influence on the self-concept of employees. This may be especially evident in a Chinese high-power-distance culture where the supervisor is a symbol of organizational authority. In such cultures, employees may be more sensitive to the supervisor–subordinate relationship than are people in Western cultures (Guo, 2011), and they view negative leadership behaviors as evidence that the supervisor has evaluated them negatively and, consequently, their self-efficacy and job performance may decrease. We note here that most research on Mead's theory has involved looking at the behavior of children and students in family and school contexts. Applying this theory to organizational behavior area suggests a new mechanism in the effects of AS.

One of the important findings of our study was that leadership justice and

supervisory trust have combined mediating effects on the negative relationship between AS and EJP, which is in line with findings in previous research suggesting that leadership justice is positively associated with supervisory trust (e.g., Colquitt, LePine, & Wesson, 2010; Mushonga et al., 2014) and represents a response to the recommendation that researchers should explore the justice–trust association in the context of social relationships, because of the complexity of the justice–trust interface (Lewicki et al., 2005). Unlike the research on this topic conducted by Mushonga et al. (2014), we explored the justice–trust association in the context of negative leadership behavior, which reveals the importance of the quality of LMX, thus extending knowledge of the mechanisms underlying the justice–trust association.

Although our study makes some theoretical contributions, it has some limitations. Because we obtained our data from employees of Chinese organizations, our findings may have limited external validity owing to cultural differences. Future researchers should use cross-cultural organizational samples to evaluate the generalizability of our findings. Moreover, although the measure of EJP we used is psychometrically sound, it may mainly reflect the nature of the EJP construct in the Chinese cultural setting. Future researchers should develop an EJP index that is valid across different cultures. We investigated several potential mediators of the relationship between AS and EJP; however, to reveal the full extent of the negative effect of AS on EJP, we recommend further research on the potential moderating influence of power distance, organizational structure, and other climate variables.

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