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Hamideh Rostamzadeh Baghcheh jogh<sup>1</sup>,  
Mohammad Nasiri<sup>2\*</sup>

1 Physical Education Teacher, Education  
Department of Maku, Maku, Iran  
2 Assistant Professor, Department of Physical  
Education, Khoy.C., Islamic Azad University,  
Khoy, Iran

Corresponding author email address:  
mnasiri@iau.ac.ir

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## The Effect of Abusive Supervision on Counterproductive Work Behavior of the Employees of the Ministry of Sports and Youth with the Mediating Role of Organizational Justice

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of abusive supervision on the counterproductive work behavior of employees in the Ministry of Sports and Youth, considering the mediating role of organizational justice. This research was descriptive–correlational, and data were collected through a field survey using questionnaires. The statistical population consisted of all 900 employees of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, and based on the Krejcie and Morgan table (1970), a sample of 269 individuals was selected using a convenience sampling method. Data were collected through the Abusive Supervision Questionnaire by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007), the Counterproductive Work Behavior Questionnaire by Golparvar and Khaksar (2008), and the Organizational Justice Questionnaire by Niehoff and Moorman (1993). The face and content validity of the questionnaires were confirmed by the supervising professor, and the reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior, and organizational justice questionnaires were calculated as 0.87, 0.88, and 0.91, respectively. For data analysis, descriptive statistics, Spearman's correlation coefficient, and the Sobel test were applied using SPSS and PLS software. The results showed that abusive supervision has a positive effect on the counterproductive work behavior of the Ministry of Sports and Youth employees and explains 50.69% of the variance in counterproductive work behavior. The findings also indicated that abusive supervision negatively affects the organizational justice of employees and accounts for 25.90% of its variance. Furthermore, organizational justice was found to have a negative effect on counterproductive work behavior and explains 10.17% of its variance. Therefore, it is recommended that managers and supervisors enhance organizational justice and avoid abusive behaviors to foster a healthier and more motivating work environment, thereby preventing counterproductive work behaviors.

**Keywords:** abusive supervision, counterproductive work behavior, Ministry of Sports and Youth, organizational justice

### Introduction

In contemporary organizational studies, the exploration of destructive supervisory behaviors and their impact on employees' attitudes and performance has become increasingly significant. One of the most critical and harmful managerial practices identified is abusive supervision, defined as sustained displays of hostile verbal and non-verbal behavior by supervisors, excluding physical contact [1, 2]. Such behaviors undermine the psychological well-being of employees and can trigger a range of negative outcomes, including decreased motivation, reduced trust, and increased withdrawal tendencies [3, 4]. Within public sector contexts, especially ministries and government organizations, these dynamics pose severe

challenges because bureaucratic structures often amplify hierarchical power imbalances and make it harder for employees to resist or report abuse [5, 6].

In response to this phenomenon, research has increasingly examined counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), which encompass intentional actions by employees that harm the organization or its members, such as sabotage, withdrawal, and interpersonal aggression [7, 8]. CWBs not only reduce productivity but also threaten long-term organizational sustainability by eroding culture and increasing operational risks [9, 10]. Studies demonstrate that abusive supervision directly increases the likelihood of these detrimental behaviors because it breeds frustration, feelings of injustice, and retaliatory motives [11, 12].

One crucial theoretical lens to explain these dynamics is organizational justice, which refers to employees' perceptions of fairness regarding resource distribution (distributive justice), decision-making processes (procedural justice), and interpersonal treatment (interactional justice) [13, 14]. Empirical studies show that when workers perceive fair treatment, they are more willing to engage in positive extra-role behaviors and less likely to retaliate against the organization [15, 16]. Conversely, a climate of injustice fosters cynicism and alienation, paving the way for CWBs [17, 18]. Notably, abusive supervision is strongly associated with reduced perceptions of justice: supervisors who belittle, humiliate, or disregard employee input disrupt the fairness climate at both interpersonal and procedural levels [19, 20].

This link between abusive supervision and justice perceptions has been highlighted in multiple public-sector contexts. For example, studies in Iranian sports and youth organizations reveal that leaders' hostile behaviors undermine trust and erode fairness perceptions, which in turn reduce organizational citizenship behaviors [21, 22]. Similarly, empirical evidence shows that when supervisors demonstrate ethical and respectful conduct, employees report stronger justice perceptions and greater job satisfaction [23, 24]. These findings suggest that organizational justice may function as a mediating mechanism linking abusive supervision to outcomes such as CWB and organizational commitment [5, 6].

Beyond Iran, international studies reinforce these patterns. For instance, research in Asian banking and healthcare sectors shows that justice perceptions buffer the negative effects of abusive leadership on job performance and discretionary behaviors [25, 26]. Additionally, fairness and inclusive leadership reduce intentions to withdraw and foster resilience in high-intensity environments [2, 27]. Studies from Indonesia and Malaysia also emphasize the protective role of procedural justice in promoting work engagement and reducing deviance [28, 29].

The Ministry of Sports and Youth provides a compelling institutional setting for examining these dynamics. As a large public organization with hierarchical leadership structures and high employee interaction, the potential for supervisory abuse is considerable. Employees often face constraints in reporting mistreatment due to cultural norms and fear of retaliation [5, 15]. Additionally, as past research in this ministry has shown, the level of perceived fairness directly affects organizational voice, commitment, and well-being [24, 30]. The interplay between leadership style and justice is therefore highly consequential for both employee outcomes and organizational performance.

The conceptual model for this study draws on social exchange theory and uncertainty management theory. Social exchange theory suggests that when employees experience fair and respectful treatment, they reciprocate with positive behaviors; when they face hostility and unfairness, they withdraw or retaliate [1, 9]. Uncertainty management theory argues that fairness information helps employees cope with ambiguity in hierarchical systems; when supervisors behave abusively,

fairness cues decline, increasing insecurity and fueling counterproductive responses [2]. Thus, organizational justice emerges as a key explanatory link between abusive supervision and CWBs [19, 22].

Despite growing recognition of these links, several research gaps remain. First, much of the extant work has focused on Western or private-sector contexts, with limited empirical evidence from governmental organizations in developing countries [31, 32]. Cultural and structural differences in public institutions, such as centralized power and rigid hierarchies, may intensify both the frequency and the consequences of supervisory abuse [5, 15]. Second, while studies have examined justice as a mediator, they have often treated it as a single construct rather than distinguishing among distributive, procedural, and interactional dimensions [13, 23]. This study contributes by evaluating organizational justice comprehensively, providing a nuanced understanding of how fairness perceptions buffer the effects of destructive leadership.

Additionally, earlier Iranian studies have primarily addressed the relationship between justice and positive outcomes like organizational citizenship behavior and commitment [21, 22]. Far less attention has been paid to how justice perceptions can mitigate negative outcomes such as CWBs, which are equally important for organizational effectiveness [16, 17]. Moreover, while some scholars have emphasized the ethical and legal importance of creating just work environments, practical frameworks for intervention and policy development in public sector contexts remain underdeveloped [32, 33].

The present study addresses these gaps by examining the direct effect of abusive supervision on CWBs and the mediating role of organizational justice in a large public organization—the Ministry of Sports and Youth.

## Methodology

The present research employed a descriptive–correlational design. Data were collected in the field using a survey method and questionnaires. The statistical population consisted of all 900 employees of the Ministry of Sports and Youth. According to the Krejcie and Morgan table (1970), a sample of 269 individuals was selected through convenience sampling. To collect data, the Abusive Supervision Questionnaire developed by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007), the Counterproductive Work Behavior Questionnaire by Golparvar and Khaksar (2008), and the Organizational Justice Questionnaire by Niehoff and Moorman (1993) were used. The face and content validity of the questionnaires were confirmed by the supervising professor. The reliability of the questionnaires, assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, was calculated as 0.87 for abusive supervision, 0.88 for counterproductive work behaviors, and 0.91 for organizational justice. For data analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM), the Sobel test, and the software packages SPSS and PLS were utilized.

## Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in the table below.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	145	54%
	Male	124	46%
Age (years)	20–30	35	13%
	31–40	87	33%
	41–50	85	31%
	51–60	62	23%
Educational Level	Associate’s and Bachelor’s	182	67%
	Master’s	76	28%
	Doctorate	11	5%

As shown in Table 1, 54% of the participants were female and 46% were male. Additionally, 35 participants were between 20 and 30 years old, 87 participants were between 31 and 40 years old, 85 participants were between 41 and 50 years old, and 62 participants were between 51 and 60 years old. Furthermore, 182 participants held associate's and bachelor's degrees, 76 participants held master's degrees, and 11 participants held doctoral degrees.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables*

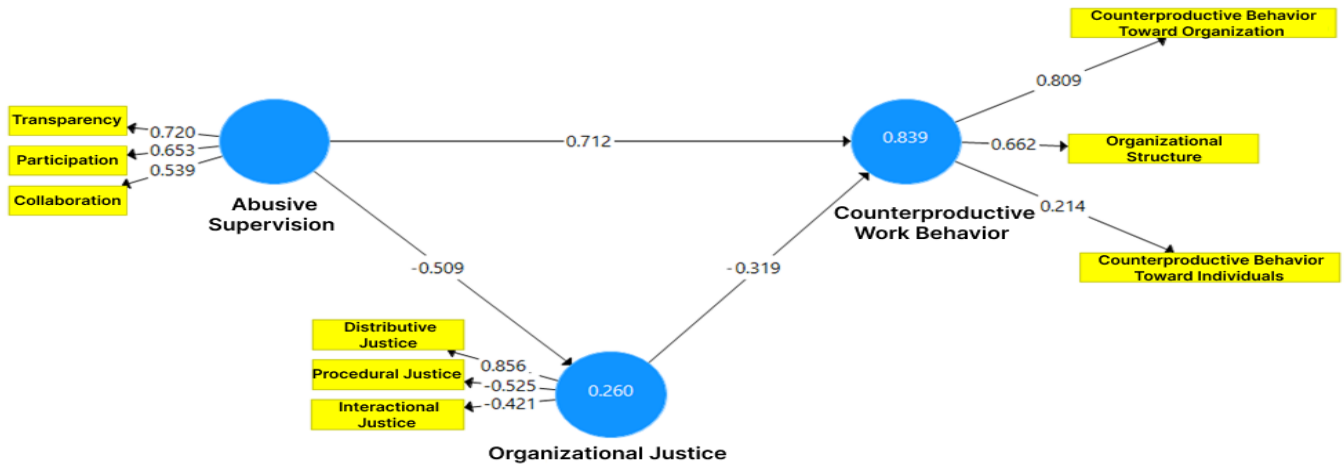
Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum Score	Maximum Score
Abusive Supervision	26.81	5.93	13	42
Counterproductive Work Behavior	68.53	11.86	46	92
Organizational Justice	71.42	8.39	26	91

According to Table 2, the overall mean of abusive supervision was 26.81, the mean of counterproductive work behavior was 68.53, and the mean of organizational justice was 71.42.

In the first step, the main research model is presented in the form of standardized coefficients and z-significance values.

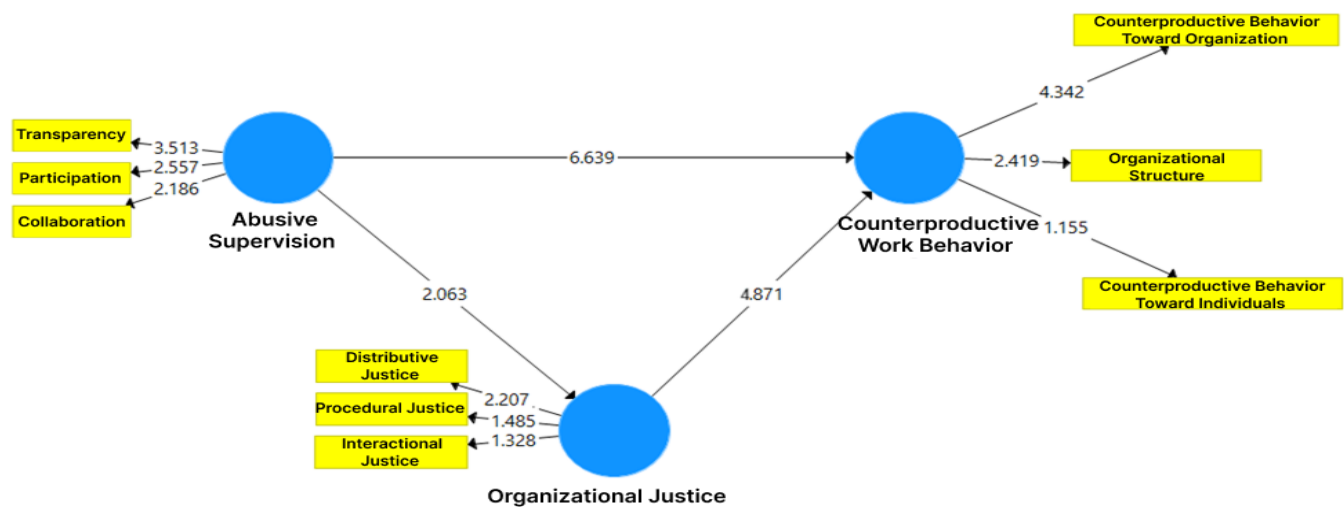
**Figure 1**

*Main Research Model with Standardized Coefficients*



**Figure 2**

*Main Research Model with z-Significance Values*



**Table 3***Path Coefficients, t-Values, and Explained Variance (R<sup>2</sup>) for the Research Hypotheses*

Hypothesis	Path	$\beta$ (Path Coefficient)	t-value	p-value	R <sup>2</sup> (%)
H1	Abusive Supervision → Counterproductive Work Behavior	0.712	6.639	0.000	50.69
H2	Abusive Supervision → Organizational Justice	-0.509	2.063	0.000	25.90
H3	Organizational Justice → Counterproductive Work Behavior	-0.319	4.871	0.000	10.17

The structural equation modeling results confirmed all three proposed hypotheses. First, abusive supervision had a strong, positive, and statistically significant effect on counterproductive work behavior among employees of the Ministry of Sports and Youth ( $\beta = 0.712$ ,  $t = 6.639$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). This path's explanatory power was substantial, with abusive supervision accounting for 50.69% of the variance in counterproductive work behavior, indicating that supervisors' hostile and demeaning behaviors significantly intensify employees' tendencies toward counterproductive actions. Second, abusive supervision showed a negative and significant impact on employees' perceptions of organizational justice ( $\beta = -0.509$ ,  $t = 2.063$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), explaining 25.90% of its variance. This result suggests that as supervisors engage in hostile supervisory practices, employees' sense of fairness and justice within the organization diminishes notably. Third, organizational justice itself exhibited a significant negative relationship with counterproductive work behavior ( $\beta = -0.319$ ,  $t = 4.871$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), with 10.17% of the variance in counterproductive work behavior being explained by perceptions of organizational justice. This indicates that higher fairness perceptions act as a mitigating factor, reducing employees' likelihood to engage in counterproductive actions. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that abusive supervision not only directly increases counterproductive work behavior but also indirectly affects it through reducing organizational justice, highlighting the dual role of supervisory conduct in shaping detrimental workplace outcomes.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to examine the direct effect of abusive supervision on counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) among employees of the Ministry of Sports and Youth and to test the mediating role of organizational justice. The findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed conceptual model and contribute to the growing body of research exploring destructive leadership and fairness perceptions as predictors of workplace deviance.

The first major result showed that abusive supervision exerts a strong positive effect on CWBs, explaining more than half of their variance. This aligns with the theoretical perspective that hostile supervisory behaviors—such as ridicule, humiliation, and public belittlement—undermine employees' psychological safety and increase the desire to retaliate or disengage [1, 3]. Previous research has similarly reported that supervisors' persistent hostility predicts a rise in interpersonal aggression, withdrawal, and production deviance [7, 8]. In Iranian organizational settings, these patterns have been documented among employees of sports and youth departments, where exposure to unethical or abusive leadership reduced morale and increased deviant acts [10, 12]. The finding that abusive supervision alone explains nearly 51% of the variance in CWBs underscores its destructive potential, especially in hierarchical public institutions where power asymmetries are pronounced [5, 6].

The second key finding concerns the negative effect of abusive supervision on organizational justice perceptions. Supervisors who engage in disrespectful and hostile behavior signal unfair treatment at both interpersonal and procedural

levels [19, 20]. This aligns with the uncertainty management theory, which holds that employees use fairness information as a coping resource in ambiguous environments; when supervisors behave abusively, trust erodes and perceptions of fairness decline [2]. Similar findings have emerged in studies of Iranian educational and sports contexts, where abusive leadership significantly undermined distributive and interactional justice [15, 21]. Research in other cultural settings, including India and Indonesia, also demonstrates that supervisory hostility disrupts fair climate perceptions and weakens the relational contract between employees and their organizations [25, 28]. By explaining nearly 26% of the variance in organizational justice, this study confirms that destructive leadership behaviors meaningfully damage fairness climates and set the stage for further negative outcomes.

The third important result reveals that organizational justice negatively predicts CWBs, supporting the long-standing view that fairness perceptions inhibit deviance by fostering trust and social exchange reciprocity [13, 16]. When employees perceive fair distribution of resources, transparent procedures, and respectful interpersonal treatment, they are less likely to retaliate or sabotage organizational goals [17, 18]. The negative relationship found here echoes findings from sports and youth departments in Khuzestan Province, where justice acted as a protective factor against emotional strain and counterproductive behavior [22]. International research also reinforces this dynamic; for example, studies in health and service industries show that procedural and interactional justice reduce turnover intentions and deviance even in high-stress work contexts [26, 27]. Although justice explained a smaller portion of variance in CWBs compared with abusive supervision, its significant mediating role highlights its potential as a leverage point for intervention.

The combined pattern of these results suggests a dual pathway: abusive supervision directly escalates CWBs but also indirectly increases them by eroding perceptions of fairness. This integrated understanding is critical. Previous Iranian studies have often examined these relationships separately—linking abusive leadership to negative outcomes [11, 12] or analyzing justice as a predictor of positive behaviors such as organizational citizenship [21, 24]. By bringing these constructs together, the present research clarifies how destructive leadership simultaneously drives deviance and weakens an essential cultural safeguard against it—organizational justice.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings strengthen social exchange theory, which posits that fair and respectful treatment triggers reciprocal positive behaviors, whereas injustice and hostility lead to withdrawal and retaliation [1, 9]. The data also align with uncertainty management theory, showing that fairness cues help employees navigate power asymmetries and unpredictability [2]. When abusive supervision removes these cues, employees become more defensive and likely to engage in CWBs to reassert control or cope with stress.

Moreover, these results resonate with recent scholarship emphasizing the cultural and organizational context of abusive supervision. In Iranian public institutions, hierarchical distance and job security concerns can discourage reporting and amplify the psychological impact of supervisor hostility [5, 15]. The present study contributes by empirically confirming that in such environments, abusive supervision is not only a direct predictor of deviance but also indirectly fosters it by eroding fairness—a mechanism that should be explicitly targeted in organizational reforms [32, 33].

International comparisons further underscore the relevance of these findings. For instance, research in banking, healthcare, and educational settings shows that when organizations cultivate strong justice norms and inclusive leadership, the harmful effects of abusive supervision on deviance and turnover are mitigated [25, 29]. Likewise, proactive procedural justice and ethical leadership in Indonesian and Malaysian organizations reduce employees' motivation to retaliate [26, 28].

These parallels indicate that although organizational culture shapes responses, fairness is a universally protective factor, and its erosion under abusive supervision is consistently damaging.

Overall, this study advances understanding by integrating destructive leadership, fairness perceptions, and deviant work outcomes in a public sector context. It provides evidence that leadership style is not only a direct predictor of harmful behaviors but also a key determinant of the justice climate, which in turn shapes whether employees uphold or violate organizational norms [16, 22].

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality. While the relationships identified are theoretically grounded, longitudinal or experimental designs would provide stronger evidence for temporal ordering between abusive supervision, justice perceptions, and CWBs. Second, data were collected solely through self-report questionnaires, which may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects. Incorporating multi-source data, such as supervisor ratings or archival performance records, would strengthen future research. Third, the study focused on a single public organization—the Ministry of Sports and Youth—which may limit generalizability to other cultural or organizational contexts. Different sectors with distinct power structures or justice climates may yield varying results. Finally, although the study assessed organizational justice as a multidimensional construct, it did not explore possible moderators, such as personality traits or resilience, which could influence how employees respond to abuse and perceived injustice.

Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to clarify the causal direction of these relationships and examine how the effects of abusive supervision and justice perceptions evolve over time. Expanding to multiple organizational contexts—including private and non-profit sectors—would improve generalizability and allow comparative analyses across industries and cultures. Researchers could also integrate additional psychological and social variables, such as emotional exhaustion, organizational trust, and coping strategies, to better understand the processes linking abusive supervision to CWBs. Experimental or intervention-based studies testing leadership training, fairness-enhancing HR policies, or grievance mechanisms could offer practical guidance on how to disrupt the abusive supervision–CWB cycle. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies could explore how cultural dimensions, such as power distance and collectivism, shape the strength of these effects and the protective role of organizational justice.

Organizations, particularly in the public sector, should prioritize leadership development programs that emphasize ethical behavior, respectful communication, and fairness in decision-making. Clear anti-abuse policies and confidential reporting channels can reduce fear of retaliation and encourage employees to voice concerns safely. HR departments should regularly assess organizational justice perceptions through climate surveys and intervene promptly where fairness gaps are identified. Providing training on conflict resolution and interpersonal skills for supervisors may reduce the likelihood of abusive behaviors. Additionally, fostering participatory decision-making and transparency can strengthen perceptions of procedural and interactional justice, creating a work environment that discourages deviance and promotes trust and engagement.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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