

---

# An initial validation of Tepper's Abusive Supervision Scale

Paola Gatti, Andrea Caputo, Claudio G. Cortese

Department of Psychology, University of Torino

claudio.cortese@unito.it

---

✎ **ABSTRACT.** La *Abusive Supervision* si riferisce ai comportamenti ostili, di tipo verbale e non verbale, messi in atto da parte del capo nei confronti dei collaboratori, con l'esclusione delle aggressioni fisiche. Il contributo presenta una prima validazione della versione italiana della scala di Tepper (2000), che rileva in che misura i collaboratori percepiscono la presenza di tali comportamenti. Lo studio è stato condotto su un campione di 496 infermieri occupati in tre ospedali, e ha evidenziato una buona validità e attendibilità: la scala può dunque essere utilizzata per iniziative di HR management e di ricerca.

---

✎ **SUMMARY.** *Abusive supervision* refers to the subjective employees' perception of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact, against them. This study proposes a first validation of the Italian version of Tepper's (2000) 15-item scale, in a sample of nurses. 496 nurses working in three hospitals in the North-West of Italy were investigated. Analyses were performed using SPSS and MPlus. The CFA confirmed the one factor structure, as in the original version of the scale, with satisfactory fit indexes. Moreover, discriminant and criterion validity analyses were performed. The findings show the good properties of the tool in its Italian version.

**Keywords:** *Abusive supervision scale, Italian validation, Nursing profession*

---

## INTRODUCTION

The term *abusive supervision* was introduced for the first time by Tepper (2000, p. 178), who defined it as the “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact”. Furthermore, the term brings to mind the image of a tyrannical boss, who ridicules and underestimates his/her subordinates. Bies (2000) lists some typical behaviors of abusive supervision: public criticism, loud and angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate actions, and coercion. Moreover, Tepper’s (2000) definition highlights that abusive supervision behaviors are not necessarily enacted in order to cause harm, but to show either indifference or hostility (e.g. talking rudely to subordinates in order to obtain the desired performance from them), publicly diminishing subordinates.

The negative effects of this construct can be interpreted through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET), according to which relations generate obligations (Blau, 1964). Therefore, employees in organizations expect a good salary, awards and fair treatment in exchange of their work. If, on the contrary, they receive abusive supervision behaviors, they will probably experience a breach of their social exchange expectations. According to SET, engaged employees expect to receive positive feedback and support in exchange for a good job, but if they receive behaviors like being belittled, withholding information and the silent treatment, they will not feel equity in the exchange and will look for other options to restore balance (Valle, Kacmar, Zivnuska & Harting, 2019). This feeling of social exchange breach recalls the breach of the psychological contract (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). In this case, the breach could even be a violation, that is a mostly affective experience of frustration, anger or resentment experienced by the worker as a result of the organization’s failure to keep one or more of the psychological contract’s promises. This experience of violation could cause negative consequences for the organization, such as reduced trust in it, withdrawal behaviors, delays, absenteeism and turnover intentions.

That of abusive supervision is a subjective evaluation made by the subordinate about the leadership style of his/her boss, and so the same behavior can be abusive for someone but not for someone else. The aspect of time is important in the abusive supervision dynamic: Tepper (2000) shows that actions that make followers feel underestimated and

ridiculous have to be extended in time to be able to talk about abusive supervision. The relationship between someone who behaves like an abusive supervisor and the target of this behavior can last until either the agent or the target terminates it, or the agent modifies his/her behaviors.

In a more recent article, Tepper and colleagues note that abusive supervision rates may be under-reported “because many targets are fearful of acknowledging their experiences as victims, even when reports can be made anonymously” (Tepper, Simon & Park, 2017, p.125).

The abusive supervision literature has shown that this style can have negative impacts on some outcomes for both the individual and the organization. For example, it has been demonstrated that it damages the worker because of its negative correlation with *employee attitudes, performance, well-being, and counterproductive behaviors* (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2012). Furthermore, “abusive supervision has been linked with lower levels of individual and group morale, executive functioning, and psychological health, as well as higher levels of counterproductive work behavior (CWB) and quit rates” (Tepper et al., 2017, p.125).

In a recent study, Watkins, Fehr and He (2019) showed that abusive supervision is not always enacted by bosses in order to denigrate their subordinates. According to their “instrumental perspective” of abusive supervision, leaders may attack their subordinates not only for its own sake, but in an effort to achieve pro-organization results (e.g. to improve subordinates’ performance). Therefore, although leaders may be pushed to behave this way by constructive intentions, they damage the organization because of the subordinates’ increased tendency to act counterproductively (Watkins et al., 2019).

Tepper (2000) developed the first abusive supervision scale. Starting from an initial 20-item scale, items taken from the literature about non-physical abusive behaviors, the author asked 68 candidates for a degree in business administration to place items in three categories: non-physical abuse, physical abuse and other (non-abusive behavior or other type of abuse). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) showed that a 15-item model provided the best fit. All loadings for the abusive supervision scale were strong (>.50) and reliable ( $p < .01$ ), supporting the hypothesis that the items assessed a unique superordinate construct.

In addition, Tepper (2000) found that abusive supervision measured through this scale has negative correlations with psychological outcomes such as job satisfaction, life satisfaction, normative commitment, affective commitment

and positive correlations with continuance commitment, work-family conflict, family-to-work conflict, depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion.

## AIM

The present study aims to validate the Italian version of Tepper's (2000) 15-item scale in a sample of nurses by showing the results of the analyses to test for construct, discriminant and criterion-related validity. Construct validity is tested via Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Hinkin, 1998).

*H1: the 15-item scale shows a monofactorial solution.*

Discriminant validity is shown through the correlation between abusive supervision (AS) and transformational leadership (TL), while criterion validity is shown through the correlation between AS and job satisfaction (JS) and emotional exhaustion (EE). It is assumed that AS is negatively correlated with TL, because the two concepts are divergent. In fact, this type of leadership occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group.

*H2: AS is negatively correlated with TL.*

Similarly, we assume that AS is negatively correlated with JS. Tepper (2000) assumed that JS was negatively correlated with perceived organizational injustice behaviours such as AS.

*H3: AS is negatively correlated with JS.*

Lastly, we assume a positive correlation between AS and EE. This dimension is considered one of the three components of the burnout syndrome, with depersonalization and reduced personal effectiveness. Emotional exhaustion can be described as a condition in which workers feel they are no longer able to give of themselves at a psychological level because their emotional resources are depleted.

*H4: AS is positively correlated with EE.*

## METHOD

### Participants

A sample of 496 nurses was recruited ( $M_{age} = 42.6$ ;  $SD_{age} = 9.94$ ), from three Northern Italian hospitals (Hospital 1 = 28.8%; Hospital 2 = 31%; Hospital 3 = 40.2%). The nurses

in the sample reported to 55 different head nurses and three different nurse managers (Manager 1 = 14.3%; Manager 2 = 45.6%; Manager 3 = 40.1%). Particularly, the sample consisted of 83.6% women and 16.4% men; as for the education level, 53.5% of the sample had a professional nursing school diploma, 40.6% a bachelor's degree, and 5.9% a master's degree. Furthermore, 23.2% of the sample had attended one or more post-graduate courses (i.e., one or two-year programs after the bachelor's or master's degree); 79.1% of respondents worked shifts (specifically, 15.6% of these workers had two shifts during the work day and 63.5% had three shifts during the working day, and thus also worked nights); 74.2% of the sample also worked during holidays. On average, respondents had worked in the same hospital for 17.3 years ( $SD = 10.57$ ), in the same service/ward for 11.65 years ( $SD = 8.72$ ) and worked 36.86 hours per week ( $SD = 4.92$ ).

## Instruments

A back translation process (Brislin, 1970) was followed to develop the Italian version of the AS scale. The original 15 items of Tepper's scale were first translated in Italian by two researchers who worked separately. Their versions were compared to develop a single Italian version of the items. This version was translated blindly back into English by a native speaker. Minor divergences from the original were resolved, with the goal of making items easily understandable for participants.

The response scale is a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 "I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me" to 5 "He/she uses this behavior very often with me"). The English and Italian versions of the items are given in the Appendix.

To assess TL, the 7-item scale by Carless and colleagues' (2000) scale ( $\alpha = .93$ ) was used. This brief scale assesses seven transformational leader's behaviors, such as "communicates a clear and positive vision of the future" or "treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development". The scale is on a 5-point Likert scale, from "Rarely or never" to "Very frequently, if not always".

To assess JS, the COPSOQ II (Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire) scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ) from Pejtersen, Kristensen, Borg and Bjorner (2010) was used. The scale uses a 5-point Likert answer range to assess employees' satisfaction about some working aspects, with items like "Regarding your work

in general, how satisfied are you with the physical working conditions?” or “Regarding your work in general, how satisfied are you with the way your abilities are used?”.

To assess EE, the OLBI (*Oldenburg Burnout Inventory*; Demerouti, Mostert & Bakker, 2010) was used. It contains questions on both ends of the exhaustion-vigor and cynicism-dedication continua. Emotional exhaustion is one of the three characteristics of the burnout syndrome (with depersonalization and personal accomplishment). “Exhaustion is defined as a consequence of intensive physical, affective and cognitive strain, that is, as a long-term consequence of prolonged exposure to certain job demands” (Demerouti et al., 2010, p.210). Scale’s items examples, with a 4-points Likert answer range, are “There are days when I feel tired before I arrive at work” and “After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary”.

## Procedure

The study which collected the data for this validation was approved by the Bio-Ethics Committee of the University of Turin (Prot. No. 55631 of 01.02.2019).

Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were administered to participants, who were given an envelope in which they were suggested sealing the completed questionnaire. Together with the questionnaire, participants also received an invitation letter and an information sheet. Both documents provided all the necessary information about the ethics procedure developed for the study (i.e., information about the confidentiality of data, the fact that taking part in the study was completely voluntary, the data management and storage and the ways findings will be disseminated). One member of the research group collected the completed questionnaires from each ward involved in the data collection. The exact date of the gathering was specified on a large envelope used to collect the completed questionnaires sealed in the smaller individual envelopes.

## Data analyses

Analyses were performed by using SPSS and MPlus softwares. SPSS was employed for: descriptive analyses of the sample, descriptive analyses of the single items (skewness and kurtosis), and reliability analyses (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) of the

scale, correlations between abusive supervision and the other dimensions in order to test for discriminant and criterion validity.

With MPlus, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using a robust statistical method of extraction (MLR Maximum Likelihood Robust), because the assumption of normality in the data distribution was violated (see Figure 1). The appropriateness of using MLR when the normality assumption is violated is emphasized by a recent study by Li (2015). CFA was used to test for the construct validity of the scale and to confirm the mono-factorial structure indicated by Tepper (2000).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive statistics

Descriptive analyses of single items (see Table 1) show mean values from 1.16 to 1.80 (*SD* from .568 to 1.151). Skewness and kurtosis values indicate a non-normal distribution of data. Positive skewness values indicate a concentration of data in the low values (skewness on the right) and the positive kurtosis values indicate a leptokurtic curve.

Items with the highest values for skewness were, in decreasing order: i14 (4.135); i2 (3.173); i1 (3.130); i12 (3.125); i6 (3.017); i5 (2.862); i13 (2.848); i4 (2.668); i8 (2.602), while items with the highest values for kurtosis were, in decreasing order: i14 (18.854); i2 (10.451); i12 (10.329); i1 (10.070); i6 (9.406); i13 (8.438); i5 (8.188); i4 (7.012); i8 (6.336); i11 (3.404); i15 (2.649); i3 (2.870). Kurtosis in particular showed much higher values than those expected for a normal distribution.

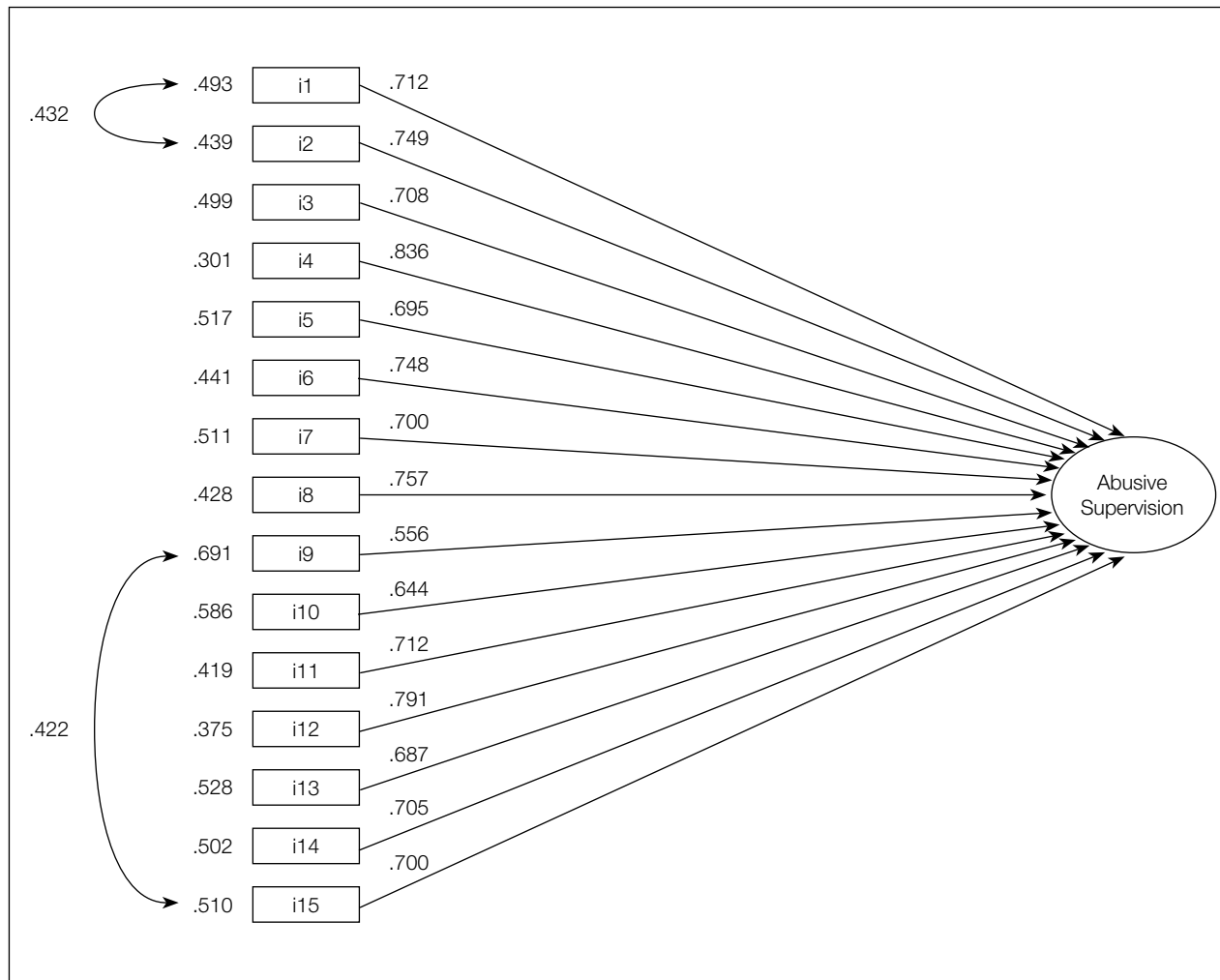
### Reliability

The scale’s reliability is satisfactory, considering the number of items: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .935$ .

### Correlations

Table 2 shows the correlations between AS, TL, JS and EE, which are useful to test the study hypotheses (H2, H3, H4) regarding the discriminant and construct validity of the Italian version of the scale.

Figure 1 – Confirmatory Factor Analysis



A strong negative correlation was found between AS and TL ( $-0.511, p < .01$ ). This provides a first proof of the discriminant validity of these two constructs, confirming H2.

For criterion validity, there is a negative correlation between AS and JS ( $-0.230, p < .01$ ), which confirms H3.

Lastly, AS shows a positive correlation with EE (.165,  $p < .01$ ), confirming H4 and proposing a further criterion analysis validity.

### Confirmatory factor analysis

CFA bore out the monofactorial structure of the scale, showing the following fit indexes:  $\chi^2 = 269.98; 90 \text{ df}; p < .001; \chi^2/\text{df} = 2.99$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .89; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .88; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .06. Modification indexes suggested correlating the error terms between two pairs of items.

**Table 1** – Descriptive analyses and Cronbach's alpha (total scale)

	N	M	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Stats	St. Err.	Stats	St. Err.
i1	489	1.26	.700	3.130	.110	10.070	.220
i2	488	1.23	.646	3.173	.111	10.451	.221
i3	489	1.53	.973	1.912	.110	2.870	.220
i4	489	1.31	.747	2.668	.110	7.012	.220
i5	489	1.30	.760	2.862	.110	8.188	.220
i6	488	1.30	.770	3.017	.111	9.406	.221
i7	487	1.62	1.041	1.594	.111	1.540	.221
i8	489	1.36	.847	2.602	.110	6.336	.220
i9	489	1.80	1.151	1.410	.110	1.086	.220
i10	488	1.75	1.093	1.422	.111	1.141	.221
i11	481	1.51	.958	1.991	.111	3.404	.222
i12	489	1.28	.738	3.125	.110	10.329	.220
i13	489	1.29	.713	2.848	.110	8.438	.220
i14	488	1.16	.568	4.135	.111	18.854	.221
i15	487	1.59	1.060	1.873	.111	2.649	.221

Note. N = 474; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .935$

**Table 2** – Correlations

	TL	JS	EE
AS	-.511**	-.230**	.165**

Legenda. TL = transformational leadership; JS = job satisfaction; EE = emotional exhaustion; AS = abusive supervision. \*\* $p < .01$

Since the fit indexes were good but not completely satisfactory and since there were semantic reasons to proceed as suggested by the modification indexes, the correlation between two pairs of item errors (i1 and i2, i9 and i15) was thus added to the initial solution. From a semantic standpoint, i1 and i2 could be correlated because both mean "to ridicule someone", while i9 and i15 refer to the idea of "lying" (see Appendix).

The fit indexes obtained after correlating the errors of these two pairs of items [ $\chi^2 = 198.22$ ; 88 df;  $p < .001$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.25$ ; CFI = .94; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .05], show a good fitting model, according to Hu and Bentler's (1999) cut-off values:  $>.95$  for CFI and TLI, and  $<.06$  for RMSEA.

Previous indexes show the goodness of a monofactorial model of the scale, and thus confirm H1.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study describes the findings of a first validation of Tepper's (2000) Abusive Supervision Scale in Italian. The analyses confirm the monofactorial structure of the scale, as hypothesized by the author, and show the reliability and validity of the Italian version. Furthermore, the analyses showed some shortcomings of the scale in its Italian version that can be due to semantic reasons linked to item development and/or translation. However, these shortcomings do not affect the instrument's general validity.

The first limitation is that only self-reported data were analysed in this study, and common method variance could thus be an issue. In addition, and considering the nature of the topic that the scale measures, another connected limitation is that we did not control for social desirability.

The third limitation is that this study involved only the nursing sector, so its findings must be considered in light of the characteristics of this specific population. The nursing sector's characteristics in fact differ from those of other professions (e.g. nurses have to manage different kinds of disease and deal with suffering, and may also be treated aggressively by patients; in addition, burnout is one of the most common psychological consequences affecting them). As a result, supervisors' leadership style could be perceived differently than in other professions. Hence, these analyses show the advisability of using the abusive supervision scale for future research projects with these professionals but its generalizability in the Italian context has not yet been demonstrated.

Future studies could use the Italian version of the abusive supervision scale to analyse, for instance, counterproductive behaviors by head nurses, and their possible outcomes for nurses' emotional condition. In this regard, this study shows the positive correlation of abusive supervision with emotional exhaustion, which is one of the three factors of burnout. It would be interesting to study the time trend of the relation between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion or other wellbeing and motivation at work constructs, using longitudinal designs, namely diary studies. This could also make it possible to explore the centrality of the temporal dimension in the construct of abusive supervision as defined by Tepper (2000). Lastly, considering the practical implications for the HR management, the abusive supervision scale could be used to contribute to analyzing organizational and individual leadership and followership training requirements, in order to promote specific coaching or counselling actions linked to the emerging needs (Gatti, Ghislieri & Cortese, 2017).

## References

- BIES, R.J. (2000). Interactional (in)justice: The sacred and the profane. In J. Greenberg & R. Cropanzano (Eds.), *Advances in organizational behavior: Forthcoming*. Stanford, GA: Stanford University Press.
- BLAU, P.M. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. New York: Wiley and Sons.
- BRISLIN, R.W. (1970). Back-translation for cross-cultural research. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 1 (3), 185-216. doi:10.1177/135910457000100301
- DEMEROUTI, E., MOSTERT, K. & BAKKER, A.B. (2010). Burnout and work engagement: A thorough investigation of the independency of both constructs. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 15 (3), 209-222. doi:10.1037/a0019408
- GATTI, P., GHISLIERI, C. & CORTESE, C.G. (2017). Relationships between followers' behaviors and job satisfaction in a sample of nurses. *PLoS ONE*, 12 (10), e0185905. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0185905
- HINKIN, T.R. (1998). A brief tutorial on the development of measures for use in survey questionnaires. *Organizational Research Methods*, 1 (1), 104-121. doi:10.1177/109442819800100106
- HU, L. & BENTLER, P.M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 6 (1), 1-55. doi:10.1080/10705519909540118
- LI, C.H. (2015). Confirmatory factor analysis with ordinal data: Comparing robust maximum likelihood and diagonally weighted least squares. *Behavior Research Methods*, 48 (3). doi:10.3758/s13428-015-0619-7.
- MITCHELL, M.S. & AMBROSE, M.L. (2012). Employees' behavioral reactions to supervisor aggression: An examination of individual and situational factors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97, 1148-1170. doi:10.1037/a0029452
- MORRISON, E.W. & ROBINSON, S. (1997). When employees feel betrayed: A model of how psychological contract violation develops. *Academy of Management Review*, 22, 226-256. doi:10.2307/259230
- PEJTERSEN, J.H., KRISTENSEN, T.S., BORG, V. & BJORNER, J.B. (2010). The second version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 38 (3\_ suppl), 8-24. doi:10.1177/1403494809349858
- TEPPER, B.J. (2000). Consequences of abusive supervision. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43, 178-190. doi:10.2307/1556375
- TEPPER, B.J., SIMON, L. & PARK, H.M. (2017). Abusive supervision. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4 (1), 123-152. doi:10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-041015-062539
- VALLE, M.K., KACMAR, M., ZIVNUSKA S. & HARTING, T. (2019). Abusive supervision, leader-member exchange, and moral disengagement: A moderated-mediation model of organizational deviance. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 159 (3), 299-312. doi:10.1080/00224545.2018.1466776
- WATKINS, T., FEHR, R. & HE, W. (2019). Whatever it takes: Leaders' perceptions of abusive supervision instrumentality. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30 (2), 260-272. doi:10.5465/AMBPP.2017.22



## APPENDIX

English version and Italian version of the abusive supervision scale  
(original source: Tepper, 2000)

“My boss...” 1 = “I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me”		“Il mio capo...” 1 = “Non riesco a ricordare che lui/lei abbia mai usato questo comportamento con me”	
2 = “He/she very seldom uses this behavior with me”		2 = “Lui/lei molto raramente usa questo comportamento con me”	
3 = “He/she occasionally uses this behavior with me”		3 = “Lui/lei occasionalmente usa questo comportamento con me”	
4 = “He/she uses this behavior moderately often with me”		4 = “Lui/lei usa questo comportamento moderatamente spesso con me”	
5 = “He/she uses this behavior very often with me”		5 = “Lui/lei usa questo comportamento molto spesso con me”	
1 I cannot remember...	5 He/she uses this behaviour...	1 Non riesco a ricordare... questo comportamento	5 Lui/lei usa questo comportamento...
① ② ③ ④ ⑤		① ② ③ ④ ⑤	
1	Ridicules me	Mi ridicolizza	
2	Tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid	Mi dice che i miei pensieri o sentimenti sono stupidi	
3	Gives me the silent treatment	Mi ignora	
4	Puts me down in front of others	Mi critica di fronte agli altri	
5	Invades my privacy	Invade la mia privacy	
6	Reminds me of my past mistakes and failures	Mi ricorda i miei errori e fallimenti del passato	
7	Doesn't give me credit for jobs requiring a lot of effort	Non mi dà credito per lavori che richiedono un grande sforzo	
8	Blames me to save himself/herself embarrassment	Mi incolpa di metterlo in imbarazzo	
9	Breaks promises he/she makes	Non porta a compimento le promesse che fa	
10	Expresses anger at me when he/she is mad for another reason	Esprime rabbia nei miei confronti quando è arrabbiato per un'altra ragione	
11	Makes negative comments about me to others	Fa commenti negativi su di me agli altri	
12	Is rude to me	È scortese con me	
13	Does not allow me to interact with my coworkers	Non mi consente di interagire con i miei colleghi	
14	Tells me I'm incompetent	Mi dice che sono incompetente	
15	Lies to me	Mi mente	