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The Destructiveness of Laissez-Faire Leadership Behavior

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The aim of the study is to test the assumption that laissez-faire leadership behavior is not a type of zero-leadership, but a type of destructive leadership behavior that shows systematic relationships with workplace stressors, bullying at work, and psychological distress. A survey of 2,273 Norwegian employees was conducted and analyzed. Laissez-faire leadership was positively correlated with role conflict, role ambiguity, and conflicts with coworkers. Path modeling showed that these stressors mediated the effects of laissez-faire leadership on bullying at work and that the effects of laissez-faire leadership on distress were mediated through the workplace stressors, especially through exposure to bullying. The results support the assumption that laissez-faire leadership behavior is a destructive leadership behavior.

Keywords: laissez-faire leadership, role stress, interpersonal conflicts, bullying, psychological distress

Traditionally, leadership research has focused solely on constructive leadership behaviors, such as transactional and transformational leadership, and their positive relationships with outcomes related to subordinates' job satisfaction or organizational effectiveness (Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Bass, 1990; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Tichy & Divanna, 1986). Surprisingly, empirical research on destructive leadership behaviors and their potentially negative influences is relatively limited, despite their possibly devastating consequences for subordinates as well as the organization as a whole (Rayner & Cooper, 2003; Tepper, 2000; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Moreover, when describing

destructive leaders, the focus has mainly been on *active* and *manifest* destructive behaviors as compared to *passive* and *indirect* forms. Ashforth (1994), for instance, describes so-called "petty tyrants" as leaders who are arbitrary, have self-aggrandizing behavior, belittle subordinates, lack consideration, have a forcing style of conflict resolution, discourage initiative, and use noncontingent punishment, whereas Tepper (2000) defines "abusive supervision" as superiors who are engaged in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors. However, leadership behaviors that may have negative consequences for subordinates and organizations are not necessarily limited to such active and manifest behaviors. Frischer and Larsson (2000) document that superiors' lack of initiative and action can also have detrimental effects on subordinates' job satisfaction and efficiency. Buss (1961) describes aggressive behavior at work along three principal axes: physical versus verbal, active versus passive, and direct versus indirect aggression. Consequently, aggressive leadership behaviors toward subordinates are not necessarily active and manifest but may also be *passive* and *indirect* behaviors. Passive, physical, indirect behavior could consist of a superior intentionally showing up late for a meeting hosted by a subordinate or failing to safeguard a subordinate's welfare in a risk-exposed working environment (Neuman & Baron, 2005, p. 20). Passive, verbal, indirect behavior could consist of failing to provide a subordinate with important information or feedback (Neuman & Baron, 2005, p. 20) or failing to support a subordinate when verbally attacked by a client or customer.

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Kelloway, Sivanathan, Francis, and Barling (2005) describe two types of poor leadership along an active-passive dimension. The first type consists of poor leaders who are destructive in an active manner, characterized by aggressive or abusive behaviors such as yelling, ridiculing, name-calling, and threatening subordinates with job loss and pay cuts, behaviors that are comparable to many of the destructive behaviors described by Ashforth (1994) and Tepper (2000). However, the second type of poor leadership is characterized by passive behaviors, comprising elements of both laissez-faire leadership and so-called management by exception (passive) as described in the theory of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Bass and Avolio describe laissez-faire leadership as "the absence of leadership, the avoidance of intervention, or both. With Laissez-faire (Avoiding) leadership, there are generally neither transactions nor agreements with followers. Decisions are often delayed; feedback, rewards, and involvement are absent; and there is no attempt to motivate followers or to recognize and satisfy their needs" (p. 20). According to Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939), laissez-faire leadership represents a leadership style where the leader has been nominated and still physically occupies the leadership position, but where he or she has more or less abdicated from the responsibilities and duties assigned to him or her. Accordingly, a laissez-faire leadership style is not only a lack of presence, and therefore a type of zero leadership, but it implies not meeting the legitimate expectations of the subordinates and/or superiors concerned.

Kelloway and colleagues (2005) state that poor leadership, including laissez-faire leadership, may be a root cause of particular workplace stressors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, and the perceptions of low-quality interpersonal treatment by the leader, with subsequent consequences in the form of stress reactions and strains. However, empirical studies documenting such relationships between laissez-faire leadership as a predictor of workplace stressors and consequences in the form of strains are scarce. Empirical studies of laissez-faire leadership have mainly focused on direct relationships with job satisfaction, cohesiveness, and productivity (Bass, 1990), where exposure to laissez-faire leadership behavior has been shown to be negatively associated with subordinates' job satisfaction (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) as well as satisfaction with the leader and leader effectiveness (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993). Laissez-faire leadership has also been shown to be negatively

related to group-level safety climate defined as preventive actions considered, or taken, by the superior (Zohar, 2002). In line with this, Kelloway, Mullen, and Francis (2006) have found that safety-specific passive leadership predicts safety-related variables such as safety consciousness and safety climate.

The statement by Kelloway and colleagues (2005) that poor leadership is a root cause of role stress may be supported by studies on task and relations-oriented leadership styles and their relationship with role stressors. A variety of empirical studies show strong negative correlations between constructive forms of leadership (leader initiating structure, leader consideration) and workplace stressors such as role conflict and role ambiguity (Boshoff & Mels, 1995; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Teas, 1983; Zaccaro & Dobbins, 1989). Empirical research also supports the supposition that characteristics of supervisor-employee communication are related to role stress, whereby low communication frequency is associated with high levels of role ambiguity (Johlke & Duham, 2001). The referred studies document strong negative relationships between having a leader who both initiates structure and shows consideration, and role stress, indicating that laissez-faire leadership, defined as an abdication from the responsibilities and duties assigned to the superior (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939), may be positively related to the experience of role stress.

Hypothesis 1: Experiencing laissez-faire leadership by one's immediate superior is associated with high levels of role conflict and role ambiguity.

A lack of adequate leadership, which is the case with laissez-faire leadership, may create frustration and stress within the workgroup, which may also result in interpersonal tensions and escalated conflict levels (Einarsen, 1999). Experienced frustrations with the work environment may, for instance, result in antisocial behavior in the work arena. Fox and Spector (1999) found systematic positive relationships between situational constraints such as lack of equipment, time, information, and instructions and aggression directed toward coworkers as well as the organization. A study by Fox and Miles (2001) confirmed such relationships and documented that interpersonal conflicts also predicted aggression directed toward organizational members and organizational efficiency. Kelloway and colleagues (2005) state that abusive, aggressive, or punitive leadership behaviors are sources of workplace stress, which may lead to

destructive in-group behaviors, such as isolating and excluding coworkers. Leymann (1996) focused on lack of leadership as a situational constraint, claiming that poor managerial performance, characterized by a lack of intervention in interpersonal conflicts, may lead to escalated interpersonal conflicts, even ending with someone in the department being bullied.

Hence, the notion that laissez-faire leadership may be a precursor of interpersonal conflicts among coworkers seems reasonable. When the superior has abdicated his or her responsibilities, high levels of conflicts between coworkers and other employees may be the result, a primary duty of a managers being to handle interpersonal conflicts (Bass, 1990).

Hypothesis 2: Experiencing laissez-faire leadership by one's immediate superior is associated with high conflict levels with coworkers.

Laissez-faire leadership as well as role stressors and interpersonal conflicts have also been described, and partly documented, to be strong predictors of bullying at work (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Einarsen, 1999), where bullying means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work tasks repeatedly and regularly over a period of time (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003a). However, how such factors explain exposure to bullying is still open to question. Bullying at work has been described as an end state resulting from interaction among a variety of individual, dyadic, group, and organizational factors (Hoel & Salin, 2003). How do the actual precursors, together, influence bullying? Is there, for example, an additive effect of leadership behavior, role stressors, and interpersonal conflicts? Does leadership behavior interact with workplace stressors, or is leadership behavior mediated through workplace stressors? Superiors have been identified as bullies (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Hoel & Salin, 2003), indicating a direct relationship between leadership behavior and exposure to bullying. Vartia (1996, p. 203) states that "the victims of bullying felt that envy, a weak superior, competition for tasks or advancement, and competition for the supervisor's favor and approval" were the most common reasons for bullying, pointing in the direction of additive effects of predictors. Likewise, Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen (1994) found that low satisfaction with leadership and social climate, together with role conflict and work control, was the strongest predictor of bullying in the workplace, also indicating additive effects. Leymann (1993), on his part, claimed that deficiencies in work

design, deficiencies in leadership behavior, victims being in a socially exposed position, and a low moral standard in the department were four prominent factors eliciting bullying. Others have suggested that high levels of stress may trigger aggressive behaviors among organizational members. For example, Kelloway and colleagues (2005) state that leaders who are abusive, aggressive, or punitive represent a source of stress, which may lead to destructive behaviors among coworkers, including bullying, to secure their own position in the work unit. Hence, the effect of destructive leadership on bullying may be mediated through coworkers' defensive behaviors. Hoel and Salin (2003, p. 213) state that "a so-called laissez-faire style of management may also provide a fertile ground for bullying between peers" (Einarsen et al., 1994; Hoel & Cooper, 2000). In addition, managers' ignorance and failure to recognize and intervene in bullying cases may indirectly contribute to bullying by conveying the message that bullying is acceptable. This is in line with Brodsky (1976), who states that bullying thrives in organizational cultures that support or passively accept such negative behaviors. The statements by Hoel and Salin (2003) indicate that laissez-faire leadership may facilitate aggressive behavior among coworkers, leading to a process of victimization against one or more workgroup members.

As Kelloway and colleagues (2005) state, poor leadership, such as laissez-faire leadership, may also be a root cause, predicting workplace stressors. Thus, we need to know how such leadership behavior and workplace stressors explain outcomes such as bullying. Laissez-faire leadership and workplace stressors may be direct and independent predictors of subordinates' experience of bullying at work, or this leadership style may be mediated through workplace stressors. We therefore propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: Role stressors and conflicts with coworkers mediate the relationship between superiors' laissez-faire leadership and subordinates' experienced exposure to bullying at work.

Hypothesis 4: Superiors' laissez-faire leadership is directly associated with subordinates' exposure to bullying at work.

To our knowledge, health consequences among subordinates of a laissez-faire leadership style are sparsely documented. However, a study by Nielsen, Matthiesen, and Einarsen (2005) showed that laissez-

faire leadership is associated with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among victims of bullying. Furthermore, the fact that superiors' constructive and destructive behaviors influence subordinates' health is well documented. Strong negative relationships have been found between considerate leadership and burnout (Constable & Russell, 1986; Duxbury, Armstrong, Drew, & Henly, 1984; Seltzer & Numerof, 1988). Supervisor support has been shown to be negatively related to depressive episodes (Wang, 2004). A meta-analysis (Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999) showed that supervisor support systematically moderates the stressors-strain relationship, a finding also supported by Wang and Patten (2001) and Kirmeyer and Dougherty (1988), who showed that supervisor support moderates the effects of stressors on outcomes such as major depression and tension/anxiety. Dispatchers under a high workload who reported high supervisory support engaged in more coping actions and felt less tension/anxiety than did low-support dispatchers (Kirmeyer & Dougherty, 1988).

Supportive leadership behavior is not the only leadership behavior related to health outcomes. Leiter and Maslach (1988) demonstrated a strong positive relationship between unpleasant supervisor contact and emotional exhaustion, and Hetland (2005) dem-

onstrated a systematic relationship between passive-avoidant leadership behavior and burnout. Repeated negative acts by superiors have proved to have strong direct as well as indirect health effects. Studies show that exposure to supervisory bullying may have direct effects such as anger, bitterness, anxiety, cognitive distraction, and lack of concentration (Barling, 1996; Brodsky, 1976; Björkquist, Österman, & Hjeltnäck, 1994; Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994). Indirect effects include diminished psychological well-being and health, alcohol problems, and depression (Kile, 1990; Spratlen, 1995; Tepper, 2000). In the present article, we propose that laissez-faire leadership, defined as the abdication of responsibilities, may be related to psychological distress among subordinates. In line with earlier hypotheses, and as stated by Kelloway and colleagues (2005), we retain laissez-faire leadership as a root cause of workplace stressors and strains and propose a model (see Figure 1) whereby the effects of laissez-faire leadership on psychological distress are mediated through role stressors, conflicts with coworkers, and bullying at work.

Hypothesis 5: Role stressors, conflicts with coworkers, and bullying mediate the relationship

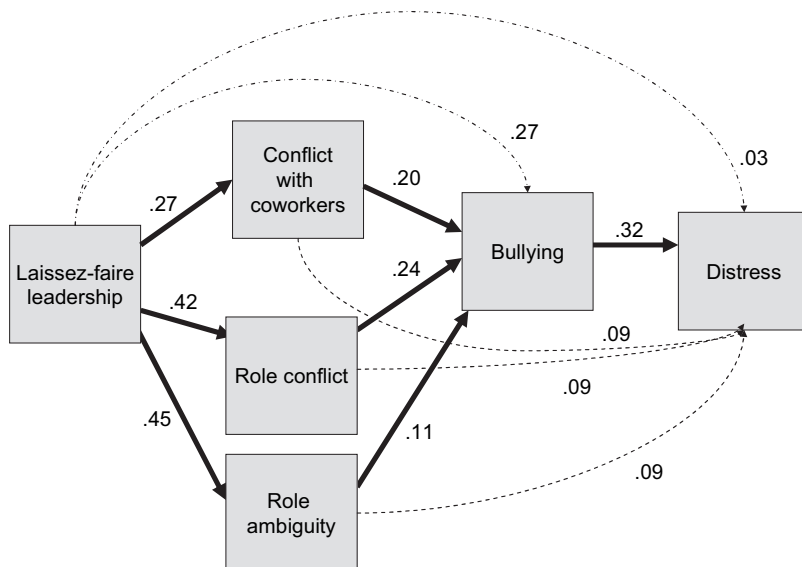


Figure 1. Path diagram of standardized path coefficients in the saturated Model 1. Bold arrows indicate the hypothesized default model (M1). Dotted arrows indicate modifications made on the default models (M2, M3, and M4).

between superiors' laissez-faire leadership and psychological distress among subordinates.

Method

Sample

The research questions were studied in a sample of 2,273 Norwegian employees. Statistics Norway selected a representative sample of 4,500 from the official Norwegian employee register, and they were mailed a questionnaire during the spring and summer of 2005. A total of 57% responded ($N = 2,547$). The present sample consists of those who responded that they employed full time or part time (90% of the total sample, $N = 2,273$). The mean age was 43.4 years. Fifty percent of the sample consisted of women. Mean working hours per week were 37.6. Fifty-eight percent were employed in departments with fewer than 20 employees, 24.4% were employed in departments with 20 to 49 employees, and 17.5% were employed in departments with 50 employees or more. Among the respondents in the present sample, 20% were superiors with personnel responsibilities.

Instruments

Laissez-faire leadership behavior was measured using a scale from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Five items with four response categories (*never, sometimes, quite often, and very often/nearly always*) were included. The following are two examples of items: "Has avoided telling me how to perform my job" and "Has steered away from showing concern about results." The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .73.

Constructive leadership, assessing employee-centered, production-centered, and change-centered leadership, was measured using a revised scale from Ekvall and Arvonen (1991) with six items. The following are two examples of items: "Defines and clearly explains work assignments to you and your coworkers" and "Gives recognition for good performance." There were four response categories (*never, sometimes, quite often, and very often/nearly always*), and the Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .85.

Role ambiguity and role conflict were measured using the scales of Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970). The scale measuring role ambiguity has six items and seven response categories (*very true to very false*). The internal stability of the scale was satisfactory, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of .85. The scale measuring role conflict has eight items and seven response categories ranging from *very true to very false*, with a Cronbach's alpha of .83.

Conflicts with coworkers were measured using two items from the Bergen Conflict Inventory (BCI), wherein conflict is defined as "a situation where a person experiences being hindered or frustrated by another person or group at work. This situation may reflect task-oriented disagreements as well as escalated interpersonal antagonisms, alternatively, that a person experiences that someone acts in manner that spoils his or her job satisfaction or the job satisfaction of other employees." The two BCI items included, measuring task and person-related conflicts, were introduced by the following text presented after the definition: "To what de-

gree are you nowadays in the following situations: 1) a task-oriented conflict with coworkers or others in your workplace, 2) a person-oriented conflict with coworkers or others in your workplace." The inventory has four response categories (*to a high degree in conflict, to some degree in conflict, to a small degree in conflict, and not in conflict*). Pearson's correlation between the two items was .57.

Exposure to bullying was measured by the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ, Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Einarsen & Hoel, 2001), which contains 22 items and five response categories (*never, now and then, monthly, every week, and daily*). The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .90.

Psychological distress was measured by Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL-25, Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974), which includes 25 items and four response categories: *not at all, a little, quite a bit, and extremely*. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .92.

Statistical Analyses

Of the 2,273 employees, 250 had missing responses to one or more study variables, amounting to more than 10% of the sample. A rule of thumb recommends imputing or estimating missing values when the number of missing responses exceeds 5% of the data points (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Analysis of the missing responses revealed that those with missing values had lower levels of role ambiguity, were more likely to be female, were more likely to work part time, were more likely to work in small-sized units, and had a higher average age. For listwise deletion to be appropriate, data should be missing completely at random (MCAR), which is rarely the case. Single imputation of missing values was done using the E-M option in SPSS 13.0, assuming that data are missing at random (MAR).

Correlation analyses of the study variables, including partial correlations, were executed. As a final step in the analyses, relationships were tested in an overall path model including all variables, using AMOS 5.0. Because the study variables in the present study showed substantial deviations from normality, path models were tested using distribution-free estimation with the weighted least-squares estimator (WLS) (Bollen, 1989). The WLS is robust to nonnormality. To obtain appropriate confidence intervals for the total, direct, and indirect effects, we used bias-corrected accelerated bootstrap methods (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993).

Results

To examine the range of observations on study variables in the present sample, the univariate distributions were examined. The measures of destructive leadership were skewed toward the left. The mean was 0.52, reflecting the fact that the majority of workers experienced a low level of laissez-faire leadership. The cumulative distribution indicated that 18.1% of the sample had scores of 1 (*sometimes*) or greater. The scale measuring constructive leadership behavior showed a centered distribution, with a mean of 1.44. As expected, exposure to bullying in the workplace measured by the Negative Acts Question-

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Study Variables ($N = 2273$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Laissez-faire leadership	0.73	0.39	0.36	0.24	0.43	0.24	0.52	0.48
2. Role ambiguity	0.45	0.85	0.28	0.17	0.3	0.23	2.15	0.91
3. Role conflict	0.42	0.34	0.83	0.28	0.41	0.28	3.10	1.27
4. Conflicts with coworkers	0.26	0.2	0.31	0.57	0.35	0.25	1.32	0.55
5. Bullying	0.48	0.36	0.46	0.37	0.90	0.42	1.22	0.30
6. Psychological distress	0.28	0.26	0.3	0.26	0.43	0.92	1.36	0.36
7. Constructive leadership	-0.34	-0.29	-0.26	-0.10	-0.22	-0.14	1.44	0.66

Note. Numbers above the diagonal are partial correlations after controlling for constructive leadership, age, gender, unit size, and work hours. Numbers on the diagonal are Cronbach's alpha. Boldface indicates diagonal values. All correlations are $p < .01$.

naire showed a left skew, with a majority reporting little or no bullying.

The matrix below the diagonal of Table 1 shows the correlations between the study variables. Laissez-faire leadership behavior by an immediate superior was strongly correlated with role conflict and role ambiguity, whereas the correlation with conflict levels with coworkers was moderate. The strongest correlation was found between laissez-faire leadership and bullying, whereas the correlation between laissez-faire leadership and psychological distress was moderate. High levels of laissez-faire leadership were associated with high levels of workplace stressors. A moderate negative correlation was found between laissez-faire leadership and constructive leadership. Constructive leadership also moderately to little correlated with role conflict, role ambiguity, conflict levels with coworkers, and bullying at work. All reported correlations were statistically significant at the .01 level.

The partial correlations among the study variables after controlling for constructive leadership, age, gender, unit size, and work hours are shown in the upper diagonal of Table 1. Associations between

laissez-faire leadership and the workplace stressors (role conflict, role ambiguity, conflict levels with coworkers, bullying and psychological distress) hardly changed when controlled for constructive leadership, age, gender, unit size, and work hours.

To test potential pathways that may mediate the effects of laissez-faire leadership behavior on psychological distress, a series of path models was tested and compared. In the default model of interest, we hypothesized a sequence of paths from laissez-faire leadership behavior via the proximal role stressors and role conflicts with coworkers and bullying, with distress as the endpoint in the model. The hypotheses were that laissez-faire leadership is associated with high levels of role ambiguity, role conflict, and conflict with coworkers. In turn, these kinds of workplace stressors trigger bullying of the individual, with increased distress as a reaction to such negative acts. Because it would be an overly restrictive assumption to assume that laissez-faire leadership is the only common predictor of role stressors, we allowed the residuals of role stressors and conflict with coworkers to correlate.

Table 2 shows a model summary. The formulated

Table 2
Model Summary for Mediating Models of Relationships Among Laissez-faire Leadership Behavior (LF), the Proximal Mediators Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity, Conflicts Between Coworkers and Bullying at Work Respectively, and Psychological Distress (PD)

Model	Npar	Chi square	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	CFI	RMSEA	90% CI	<i>P</i> -Close
M0. Independence model	6	488.80	15	0	—	—	—	—
M1. Mediated effects only	16	93.09	5	0	0.81	0.09	(0.07, 0.10)	0.00
M2. LF direct effects on bullying	17	28.85	4	0	0.95	0.05	(0.04, 0.07)	0.38
M3. Effects on PD via mediators	20	0.68	1	0.41	1.00	0	(0.00, 0.05)	0.94
M4. LF direct effects on PD	21	0.00	0	—	1.00	—	—	—

Note. LF = laissez-faire leadership behavior; Npar = number of free parameters; PD = psychological distress.

baseline Model 1 (M1) fit the data fairly poorly as indicated by a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.09 and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of .81, indicating that the conflict-mediation model was not entirely consistent with the data. As a natural modification of Model 1, Model 2 (M2) included the addition of a direct path between laissez-faire leadership behavior by the immediate supervisor and bullying at work (see Figure 1). The RMSEA of 0.05 indicated that this model (M2) fit the data fairly well, better than the conflict-mediation model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 64.24$). In Model 2, all effects of laissez-faire leadership behavior by the immediate superior on psychological distress were mediated through bullying. Thus, as an alternative specification, Model 3 (M3) included a direct path from conflict with coworkers to psychological distress (see Figure 1). Given only one degree of freedom, this model naturally fit the data well. This model had an RMSEA of 0.00 and a CFI of 1. As a final model (M4), a direct link between laissez-faire leadership behavior by the immediate superior and psychological distress was added (see Figure 1) to include any residual variance in distress that was not explained through the other pathways. This model was equivalent to the saturated model, with no degrees of freedom. The reduction in χ^2 was only 0.61, suggesting no significant direct link between laissez-faire leadership behavior by the immediate superior and psychological distress.

Figure 1 shows standardized path coefficients for the saturated model, including direct and indirect pathways among laissez-faire leadership, works stressors, bullying, and psychological distress. The arrows in bold describe the route of pathways proposed in the baseline model. The dotted arrows describe added pathways. The figure shows that laissez-faire leadership showed rela-

tively strong direct links to bullying and bullying in turn showed moderate relationships with psychological distress. To get a better impression of the overall effects, these pathways between laissez-faire leadership and outcomes were decomposed into total, direct, and indirect effects. Table 3 shows that there was a strong total effect of laissez-faire leadership behavior on bullying. Less than half of this effect was mediated through role stressors and conflict with coworkers. For psychological distress, the total effect of laissez-faire leadership behavior was 0.27. This effect was almost fully mediated through bullying and role stressors, indicated by an indirect effect of 0.25. The indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership behavior on psychological distress could be further decomposed: mediated through bullying was .15, whereas the rest of the indirect effects were mediated through role-stressors and conflict with coworkers.

Discussion

The experience of laissez-faire leadership by an immediate superior showed relatively strong associations with elevated levels of role conflict as well as role ambiguity. The results support the assumption that when a superior ignores legitimate expectations from subordinates by lack of presence, involvement, feedback, and rewards, such behaviors may influence subordinates' role experiences. To our knowledge, no empirical studies have studied the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and interpersonal role stress. However, a high number of empirical studies have shown strong negative relationships between constructive forms of leadership (leader initiating structure, leader consideration) and role stress

Table 3
Pathways Between Laissez-faire Leadership and Outcomes Decomposed Into Indirect, Direct, and Total Effects With 95% Bias-Corrected Accelerated Confidence Intervals

Dependent	Effects of Laissez-Faire Leadership					
	Indirect	95% BC intervals	Direct	95% BC intervals	Total	95% BC intervals
Role ambiguity	—	—	0.45	(0.41, 0.50)	0.45	(0.41, 0.50)
Role conflict	—	—	0.42	(0.39, 0.46)	0.42	(0.39, 0.46)
Conflicts with coworkers	—	—	0.27	(0.20, 0.31)	0.27	(0.20, 0.31)
Bullying	0.21	(0.18, 0.23)	0.27	(0.20, 0.33)	0.48	(0.40, 0.53)
Psychological distress	0.25	(0.21, 0.30)	0.03	(-0.04, 0.08)	0.28	(0.23, 0.32)

Note. BC = bias-corrected.

(Boshoff & Mels, 1995; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Teas, 1983; Zaccaro & Dobbins, 1989). The absence of such constructive behaviors is therefore not a zero state of leadership but represents the nonfulfillment of legitimate expectations, which may be negatively associated with subordinates' role stress. The correlations between laissez-faire leadership and the two role stressors are comparable with those coefficients reported in Jackson and Schuler's seminal metastudy of leader consideration (1985), indicating that laissez-faire leadership is negatively associated to role ambiguity comparable to the positive association between leaders' consideration and role ambiguity. This is in line with Lincoln (2000), who states that empirical evidence supports the notion that negative social interactions can be potentially more harmful than social support is helpful, which supports Baumeister and colleagues' general conclusion on interpersonal relationships that "bad is stronger than good" (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). We also note that the two partial coefficients representing the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict and role ambiguity ($pr = .36$ and $pr = .40$), when controlled for constructive leadership and demographic variables, are of comparable size. Hence, it may be concluded that the relationships between laissez-faire leadership and workplace stressors are not mainly explained by the lack of constructive leadership, but first and foremost by the presence of laissez-faire leadership.

A superior may be defined as the most important role sender in a role set within a work unit (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, & Snoek, 1981), and a lack of role messages from the superior will create ambiguity concerning goals, responsibilities, influences, and work tasks. More studies support the notion that characteristics of supervisor-subordinate communication are critical for subordinates' experiences of ambiguity (Johlke & Duhan, 2001). In particular, communication frequency has proven to be negatively related to role ambiguity experienced at work (Johlke & Duhan, 2001; Keller, 1994; Kim & Umanath, 1993; Zeffane & Gul, 1993), where the lack of communication, represented by an absent or careless laissez-faire leader, may result in subordinates experiencing role ambiguity. Correspondingly, a lack of systematic information from a superior to members of a team or within a department may result in conflicting expectations regarding who is responsible for assignments and task accomplishment, resulting in experienced role conflict. Hence, Hypothesis 1, which states that experiencing laissez-faire leadership by one's immediate superior is associated

with high levels of role conflict and role ambiguity, is supported by the present study.

The experience of laissez-faire leadership by an immediate superior also showed a significant association with high conflict levels among coworkers; however, the partial correlation ($pr = .23$) was clearly lower than that between laissez-faire leadership and role stressors. The result supports the assumption that a laissez-faire leader, through his or her ignorance and absence, is related to a social climate characterized by high conflict levels. To our knowledge, no empirical studies have explored the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and interpersonal conflicts. However, transformational leadership has proved to predict group cohesiveness (Pillai & Williams, 2004; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2003; Jung & Sosik, 2002) as well as performance on a group level (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003), while direct studies of relationships between transformational leadership and interpersonal conflicts are scarce or lacking (Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004). Furthermore, Burns (1978) stated that conflicts offer superiors an opportunity to display leadership through confronting conflicts and exploiting them for the improvement of both relationships and efficiency at work, and Bass (1990, p. 287) stated that the management of conflict is a management role of high importance: "Often it may involve transactional leadership to move the conflicting employees, groups, or organizations to accept that the bargain that can be struck with the opposition can bring more benefits and less costs than can continuing the conflict." Leymann (1996) described the opposite type of leadership behavior, namely poor managerial performance, characterized by a superior denying that a conflict exists, and stated that this behavior may be a strong cause of a conflict escalation process in which bullying may be the end result. Laissez-faire leadership implies a lack of supportive leadership and may lead to a lack of conflict confrontation and conflict management. Consequently, the systematic relationship between such leadership behavior and elevated conflict levels found in the present study may be expected and is in line with Hypothesis 2.

Workplace stressors such as role conflict and role ambiguity, as well as interpersonal conflicts and deficient leadership, have been identified as precursors of bullying at work (Einarsen et al., 1994; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Leymann, 1996; Vartia, 1996; Zapf & Gross, 2001). However, it is open to question how workplace stressors and leadership behavior predict bullying at work. Path analysis shows that the association between laissez-faire leadership and bullying

is mainly mediated through the workplace stressors role conflict and conflicts with colleagues (see Figure 1). This supports the notion that a laissez-faire leadership style provides fertile ground for bullying between coworkers (Hoel & Salin, 2003), possibly by creating a social climate characterized by high levels of interpersonal conflicts and role stress. In terms of conflict theory, bullying represents an unsolved social conflict that has reached a high escalation level, combined with a power imbalance between the offender(s) and the victim (Zapf & Gross, 2001). Likewise, Leymann (1996) claimed that poor managerial performance, characterized by a lack of intervention in interpersonal conflicts, may lead to escalated interpersonal conflicts, with the result that someone is, or perceives himself or herself to be, bullied in the department. Such escalated conflicts, with bullying as a possible end state, may be the result of deficient leadership, whereby the superior does not sanction antisocial acts by members of the team and/or does not stimulate or reward prosocial behaviors in the team (cf. Podsakoff, Todor, & Skov, 1982). It is also reasonable to believe that conflicts between coworkers are not only instigated by a laissez-faire leadership style, but that where there are conflicts between coworkers, it is of great importance that the superior is proactive in the management of such conflicts (Bass, 1990). A laissez-faire leader is definitively not proactive in this sense. Hence, high conflict levels seem to constitute a strong link between deficient leadership and bullying at work, irrespective of who instigates such conflicts. We may conclude that more researchers, directly or indirectly, support the present finding, which indicates that bullying may be a process starting with ignorant leaders, being mediated through workplace stressors such as role conflict and interpersonal conflicts, with bullying as an end state.

Kelloway and colleagues (2005) propose that abusive leadership may even elicit destructive behaviors and bullying as a type of defensive action by colleagues. Hence, laissez-faire leadership is not necessarily the starting point of a conflict escalation process with bullying as the end result. Laissez-faire leadership may also nurture such a process ending in bullying in a department that was characterized by high levels of conflicts between coworkers in the first place. Moreover, bullying can be defined as both a workplace stressor and an outcome of leadership behavior and workplace stressors, which is the case in the present study. Results in the present study support Hypothesis 4, which states that laissez-faire leadership is also directly related to bullying (Table 1 and Figure 1). A direct relationship implies that a

laissez-faire leadership style is comparable to a superior who bullies (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003b). The absence of adequate leadership, where decisions are often delayed and feedback, rewards, and involvement are absent (Bass & Avolio, 1990), may be experienced by the subordinate as systematic neglect and ignorance. Such dramatic, negative experiences are richly described in Frischer and Larsson's study (2000) concerning the detrimental effects of a supervisory laissez-faire leadership style on doctoral students' job satisfaction and efficiency. Direct effects of laissez-faire leadership on bullying are also in line with Bass's (1990) description of passive and indirect behaviors that may be experienced as serious forms of aggression. Ignoring a subordinate systematically over a period of time may be experienced by the subordinate as rejection and expulsion, which are central characteristics of the phenomenon of bullying at work (Einarsen & Hoel, 2001). Consequently, Hypothesis 4, which states that laissez-faire leadership is directly associated with subordinates' experience of bullying, is sound and is supported by the research literature as well as the present data.

Bullying at work has proved to have many antecedents, leadership behavior being one of them (Einarsen et al., 1994; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Leymann, 1993; Vartia, 1996). The present study supports the assumption that laissez-faire leadership is associated with bullying at work in different ways. One promising explanation, receiving support in this study, is that laissez-faire leadership affects bullying through a stressful work environment, especially through role conflicts and interpersonal conflicts.

Kelloway and colleagues (2005) presented poor leadership as a root cause of stressors, indicating an indirect relationship between leadership behavior and distress mediated by workplace stressors. Path analyses (see Figure 1) showed systematic relationships between laissez-faire leadership and psychological distress, where the effect was almost fully mediated through bullying and workplace stressors, with bullying being the strongest mediator. The results support studies showing systematic relationships between leadership behaviors and health outcomes, such as a direct negative relationship between considerate leadership and burnout (Constable & Russell, 1986; Duxbury, Armstrong, Drew, & Henly, 1984; Seltzer & Numerof, 1988), a systematic positive relationship between a passive avoidant leadership and burnout (Hetland, 2005), and systematic negative associations between supervisor support and psychological well-being and depressive episodes (Gilbreath & Benson, 2004; Wang, 2004). Further-

more, many studies show positive direct relationships between abusive and bullying leadership behaviors and health outcomes such as diminished psychological well-being, subjective health, and depression (Kile, 1990; Spratlen, 1995; Tepper, 2000). However, how workplace stressors mediate the effects of leadership behavior on health outcomes is, to our knowledge, sparsely studied. We assume that such studies may have high relevance, especially when we focus on passive destructive forms of leadership. The present article supports Hypothesis 5, that workplace stressors and bullying constitute such mediating factors. Other candidates for future study could be downsizing (Sheehan, 1999), organizational injustice (Tepper, 2001), and different kinds of coping behaviors on the part of the subordinate (Snow, Swan, Raghavan, Conell, & Klein, 2003).

The present analysis of the relationships among laissez-faire leadership, workplace stressors, bullying, and psychological distress is based on a representative sample of Norwegian employees, with a cross-sectional design with single-informant reports on all study variables. Some limitations of such a design must be taken into account when interpreting the results. Halo effects and common methods variance are common response biases in questionnaire research (Murphy & Anhalt, 1992; Avolio, Yammarino, & Bass, 1991). We cannot exclude the possibility of a general impression halo effect, whereby a rater's overall negative impression or evaluation of the leader leads the rater to evaluate all aspects of performance in a manner consistent with this general impression or evaluation. Thus, to the extent that future research primarily makes use of self-reported data, it would be sensible to impose some control for response biases. The extent to which subjective reports of outcomes correspond with more objective indicators has been addressed in previous research (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Bommer, 1996). The use of subjective outcome measures of effectiveness has been criticized for inflating relationships, but then again, using objective criteria is found to have an attenuating effect. For instance, in terms of motivational outcomes, it is reasonable that subjective criteria are more appropriate (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996).

The distributions of laissez-faire leadership and bullying in the present study are skewed with few high score cases, which might reduce the observed statistical relationships among leadership behaviors, mediators, and outcomes. However, the study sample consists of participants from a representative sample of the Norwegian workforce, indicating that the ac-

tual distributions are representative of the true distributions in the population (i.e., the Norwegian workforce). Generally, Norwegian working life is characterized by a low frequency of bullying (Nielsen et al., 2006). Hence, the relationships investigated in the present study might be stronger in populations with higher rates of laissez-faire leadership and bullying.

Although the tested models depict theoretical causal relationships, it is important to stress that the cross-sectional design provides a weak basis for making causal inference. In the present article, the authors assume laissez-faire leadership to be a precursor (that is, a root cause) of interpersonal conflicts and role stress, resulting in bullying and psychological distress. However, cross-sectional data are open to possible reverse causality. This means that, in principle, bullying, interpersonal conflicts, and so forth may lead to laissez-faire leadership behaviors. However, more longitudinal studies support the notion that leadership behaviors, such as transformational and transactional leadership behaviors, affect outcomes reflecting job satisfaction and leader effectiveness (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Regarding laissez-faire leadership, a longitudinal study by Yammarino, Bass, and Spangler (1993) supports the notion that such leadership behavior is the cause of negative outcomes. Cross-sectional relationships typically reflect a compound of reciprocal relationships that can only be fully isolated through a longitudinal study or an experimental design. Still in an early phase of model building, the present study constitutes an important first step that can be further developed with prospective data.

Conclusion

The results indicate that laissez-faire leadership may be more of a counterproductive leadership style than a zero type of leadership style, associated with a stressful environment characterized by high levels of role stress and interpersonal conflicts. When workplace stressors and interpersonal problems are not dealt with, they may even escalate into bullying, resulting in high levels of psychological distress among those involved and even among those observing the bullying. Organizations should not only prevent and manage abusive and aggressive leadership, but they should also be aware of the potentially negative effects of laissez-faire leaders, who create work environments with high levels of interpersonal stressors.

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