EMJ
EUROPEAN
MANAGEMENT
JOURNAL

Management Focus

Daily work pressure and exposure to bullying-related negative acts: The role of daily transformational and laissez-faire leadership

Kari Wik Ågotnes [a, *], Anders Skogstad [a], Jørn Hetland [a], Olav Kjellevold Olsen [a, b], Roar Espevik [a, c], Arnold B. Bakker [d, e], Ståle Valvatne Einarsen [a]

[a] Department of Psychosocial Science, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway
[b] BI Norwegian Business School, Bergen, Norway
[c] Royal Norwegian Naval Academy, Bergen, Norway
[d] Center of Excellence for Positive Organizational Psychology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands
[e] University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The present study integrates the work environment hypothesis and the effort-reward imbalance model to argue that work-related antecedents of workplace bullying are moderated by the day-to-day leadership practices of one's immediate leader. Specifically, we propose that individuals' daily experiences of work pressure are positively related to their daily experiences of bullying-related negative acts. Moreover, we claim that this relationship is weaker on days when those individuals report high (vs. low) levels of transformational leadership behaviour, and stronger on days when they report high (vs. low) levels of laissez-faire leadership behaviour. To test these three hypotheses, we asked 61 naval cadets on a tall ship sailing from Northern Europe to North America to fill out a diary questionnaire for 36 days yielding 1509 observations. The results of multilevel analyses supported our hypothesis of a positive relationship of cadets' daily reports of work pressure with their daily reports of bullying-related negative acts. In addition, laissez-faire leadership behaviour (but not transformational leadership behaviour) moderated the work pressure—bullying-related negative acts relationship. Our findings support the assumption that laissez-faire leadership is an important component in the development of conflict escalation and workplace bullying, while transformational leadership is not. We discuss theoretical as well as practical implications of these findings.

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1. Introduction

Work pressure is an increasing problem in European working life, with subsequent negative impact on individual health and psychological well-being (Eurofound, 2017; Niedhammer, Chastang, Sultan-Taieb, Vermeylen, & Parent-Thirion, 2013). Leaders and managers, on the other hand, constitute an essential resource in any organization with a responsibility to ensure the health and well-being of followers, particularly at times of high work pressure. Such duty of care to cater for and guard follower health and well-being is even legally founded in most western countries (Ironside & Seifert, 2003; The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, 2017), and of special importance in high pressure work situations.

Moreover, a stressful working environment may not only be a problem in its own right but may lead to secondary problems such as increased social tension in the work group. In this regard, scholars have argued that workplace bullying and harassment particularly thrive in demanding workplaces, where employees experience organizational constraints and contradictory expectations and demands (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Van den Brande, Baillien, De Witte, Vander Elst, & Godderis, 2016). Such triggering factors of bullying have been extensively documented in studies employing a range of research designs, and with both targets, perpetrators, and bystanders as informants (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2009, 2007; Vartia, 1996), and with both individual and group level analyses (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2011; Skogstad, Torsheim, Einarsen, & Hauge, 2011). Yet, we lack knowledge of the processes and conditions via which workplace stressors are

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychosocial Science University of Bergen, Christies gate, 12 5015, Bergen, Norway.
E-mail address: kari.agotnes@uib.no (K.W. Ågotnes).

transformed into workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Rai & Agarwal, 2018), and especially so when focusing on day-to-day interactions in the workplace.

Managers and supervisors may both prevent, stop, permit, or engage in the mistreatment of their followers (Woodrow & Guest, 2017), depending on which behaviours they display or hold back (Harms, Credé, Tynan, Leon, & Jeung, 2017; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). This implies that leaders may shape the development of workplace bullying in different ways. Yet, most studies on leadership and workplace bullying have investigated leadership as a direct antecedent of workplace bullying (Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010; Stouten et al., 2010). Studies have shown that transformational leadership behaviours have positive main effects on follower well-being (Arnold, 2017), and is related to less workplace bullying among followers (Tsuno & Kawakami, 2015). Conversely, laissez-faire leadership, characterized by the omission of constructive leader behaviour when expected and needed (Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2014), has been related to a variety of negative outcomes, such as reduced job satisfaction, burnout, and health problems (see Skogstad, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2017, for a review). Furthermore, laissez-faire leadership predicts complaints of exposure to workplace bullying (Skogstad et al., 2007; Tsuno & Kawakami, 2015). Yet, the acts and attitudes of managers may also affect other risk factors of bullying and hence moderate other antecedent—bullying relationships (Ågotnes, Einarsen, Hetland, & Skogstad, 2018), as proposed in the work environment hypothesis (Leymann, 1996).

In general, we find a striking lack of studies investigating moderators of the workplace bullying process (Rai & Agarwal, 2018; Woodrow & Guest, 2017). This is especially worrisome in relation to leadership, because leader behaviours and non-behaviours are paramount for most aspects of followers' effectiveness and health (Montano, Reeske, Franke, & Hüffmeier, 2017). Following the principle of employers' duty of care, one may argue that attentive and supportive managers and supervisors are particularly needed in demanding situations which may escalate into social tension and even workplace bullying. Therefore, there is a strong call for studies investigating how leaders' actions and non-actions may buffer or facilitate, respectively, the well documented relationship between job stressors and reports of exposure to bullying.

As most studies in the field have been cross-sectional surveys, with but a few longitudinal or group-level studies, previous research has failed to capture within-person and day-to-day fluctuations in how workers experience their work situation (i.e. work pressure) and the behaviour of others in the work environment (i.e. leadership and exposure to bullying-related negative acts). As workplace bullying is the sum of day-to-day negative social interactions, it is highly likely that exposure to such bullying behaviours in fact takes place on days and in situations when you are experiencing stress and frustration. If so, such findings may have important theoretical as well as applied implications. Thus, there is a strong call for research that captures these daily fluctuations. Accordingly, the present study makes three important contributions to the literature on workplace bullying and leadership practices. First, the study examines the association between work pressure as a quantitative job demand and perceptions of bullying-related negative acts close to when they actually happen, allowing us to capture the effects of episodic situational influences on perceptions of bullying in the workplace (Ilies, Aw, & Pluut, 2015). Second, we contribute to a nuanced analysis and understanding of the role of leaders in the management of such high-pressure work situations. Specifically, we examine two distinct leadership practices (i.e. transformational and laissez-faire leadership), and how these practices may influence the potential risk of increased work

pressure in relation to experiences of workplace bullying as perceived by targets on a day-to-day basis. Leadership is often portrayed as an overarching construct that applies broadly over time. Yet, leadership is certainly also about day-to-day interactions with employees (Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, & Chang, 2012), which again may have important implications both for these day-to-day events and even for long-term outcomes. Finally, we examine the abovementioned relationships in a unique context, where a sample of naval cadets underwent leadership training during a tall ship voyage across the Atlantic from Northern Europe to North America, and where the acting leader changed more or less daily. In this setting, our study makes an important practical contribution by showing when and how leaders should (or should not) act when leading small teams in situations with elevated work pressure and accordingly an elevated risk of uncivil social behaviour, at least as perceived by those targeted.

1.1. Theoretical background

Workplace bullying may be defined as "an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts" (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2020, p. 26). A core element in this definition is the exposure to 'systematic negative social acts', which includes both verbal and physical, as well as direct and indirect acts — experienced as negative and unwanted by those targeted. From this, we may view bullying both as (1) an end state, (2) an ongoing process, and (3) as a situation that plays out through perceptions of specific negative acts happening on a daily or weekly basis. Focusing on the latter aspect of bullying, the present study investigates exposure to such bullying-related negative acts as they are reported, on a day-to-day basis. In this regard, the measurement used in the present study does neither take into consideration the prolonged nature of the exposure, nor the imbalance of power across days. Hence, the present study measures perceived daily exposure to some typical bullying-related negative acts, which may also appear in cases of highly escalated interpersonal conflict, or in cases of mere workplace incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Notelaers, Van der Heijden, Guenter, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2018).

The work environment hypothesis (Leymann, 1996) states that a work environment characterized by high levels of job demands creates a fertile ground for social tension which then may escalate into workplace bullying, especially if not properly managed — typically when laissez-faire leadership prevails. However, where the work environment hypothesis is specific when discussing this lack of leadership, the theory is not quite as specific in describing said stressful working conditions. In this, the effort-reward imbalance (ERI) model (Siegrist, 1996) may be valuable in our further understanding of why high levels of daily work pressure may lead to reports of increased daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts. As work pressure may be understood as a type of quantitative job demand that has reached a level above what is considered normal or acceptable in a certain situation or for a given employee (Van Veldhoven, 2014), it may demand additional effort among those exposed, taxing their energetic resources.

Central in the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996) is the notion of reciprocity between efforts spent and rewards received in return. While effort represents the demands and obligations the employee face, rewards are conceptualized as the money, esteem, and career opportunities the employee expects in return (Siegrist, 1996). Experiencing a lack of reciprocity in terms of high 'costs' (i.e. effort) and low 'gains' (i.e. reward) is theorized to elicit negative emotions in exposed individuals (Siegrist et al., 2004). Work-related stress may therefore be conceptualized as a

mismatch between efforts expended (i.e. work pressure) and rewards received at work (Siegrist, 1996; Siegrist et al., 2004). More specifically, when people are confronted with high-pressure situations, their efforts will need to increase. However, this increase in effort is contingent on receiving an equivalent increase in rewards or resources. In the absence of such resources, feelings of stress and frustration will arise, and the individual employee will be more vulnerable to conflict episodes and bullying-related negative acts (Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996). Such individual perceptions may even reflect a general increase in work pressure among more or less all colleagues, creating an elevated level of frustration in the work group, which may also affect potential perpetrators.

With regard to our study, we propose that these theoretical notions may even explain events that happen on a daily basis. That is, on days where employees experience an increase in work pressure, be it as a reflection of the existing social context or a specific individual experience that day, they may also experience not having the necessary time or resources to complete assignments in time or at the expected quality, leaving them more susceptible to stress. On days with enhanced work pressure, there will also be restricted time to manage arising conflicts in the work group (Zapf et al., 1996), increasing the likelihood that unsolved conflicts escalate, resulting in an increase in the level of aggression between leaders and followers as well as between peers. Consequently, employees might make more mistakes, be more sensitive to criticism, and be involved in more work conflicts, making them easy targets of negative acts on that particular day.

In line with this theoretical notion, studies show that work situations characterized by job stressors such as time pressure and high workload are related to subsequent escalated interpersonal conflicts as well as to instances of workplace bullying (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Baillien, Rodriguez-Muñoz, De Witte, Notelaers, & Moreno-Jimenez, 2011). A meta-analysis by Bowling and Beehr (2006), employing the wider concept of workplace harassment, identified increased role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and work constraints as the main work-related predictors of reported exposure to harassment. Consistent with these findings, Van den Brande and colleagues (2016) documented that employees who report higher cognitive demands and time pressure are more frequently exposed to workplace bullying. Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking, and Winefield (2009) found support for their hypothesis that, on average, employees reporting higher levels perceived job demands, also reported more bullying, as compared to employees who reported lower levels of job demands. Additionally, Notelaers, De Witte, and Einarsen (2009) showed that workload was positively related to exposure to workplace bullying. This is again in line with Baillien, De Cuyper and colleagues' (2011) longitudinal study showing that Time 1 workload was positively related to Time 2 likelihood of being a target of workplace bullying.

Although these studies have employed a between-person design we argue that through measuring these daily fluctuations we may come closer to discovering when and how the patterns of longer-term between-person differences in exposure to workplace bullying arise and develop. Following this, the present diary study examines day-to-day fluctuations in experienced work pressure as a predictor of their day-to-day experiences of bullying-related negative acts.

Hypothesis 1. Daily work pressure is positively related to daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts.

1.2. The potential role of leadership

How leaders act in high-pressure situations may be a decisive factor in determining whether bullying-related negative acts are

enacted and perceived. In this, we will look at leadership practices, not as a style of behaviour enacted consistently over time, but rather by specific behaviours played out in specific situations in relation to specific follower and their given day-to-day experiences. Theoretically, and in line with the effort-reward imbalance model, we view transformational leadership behaviours as a resource and rewards for employees. With regards to the ERI model (Siegrist, 1996), esteem rewards may be particularly relevant for understanding under which leadership conditions high levels of daily work pressure may lead to experiences of increased daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts. Conceptualizing esteem rewards as experiencing being accepted by supervisors or colleagues, as well as receiving help in difficult situations by supervisors or colleagues (Siegrist, 1996), it is conceivable that transformational, and also laissez-faire leadership, may be indications of receiving (or not receiving, in the case of laissez-faire) appropriate esteem rewards in connection with increased effort (i.e. work pressure). The negative role of laissez-faire leadership in this regard is, however, even more underscored in the work environment hypothesis, where the lack of leader intervention in cases of unfavourable working conditions is hypothesized to be a particular risk situation for conflict escalation and bullying (Leymann, 1996).

1.2.1. The buffering effect of daily transformational leadership behaviour

Transformational leadership, one of the most widely studied forms of leadership (Anderson & Sun, 2017), is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes, and, hence, may be a particularly strong esteem factor. Transformational leadership is characterized by four sub-dimensions, namely idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). Leaders who act as a coach and a mentor, paying special attention to employees' needs for achievement, and provide social support, may be of a particular importance in day-to-day situations where followers face high work pressure. Additionally, by getting followers to look at problems from different angles, transformational leaders may foster active learning and problem solving, thus buffering the imbalance created by increased effort. Furthermore, transformational leaders serve as role models for their followers, and emphasize the importance of having a collective sense of mission. By reassuring followers that obstacles will be overcome, in a collective effort, increased work pressure may not feel as insurmountable. Finally, transformational leaders behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers' work. Taken together, we argue that such transformational leadership behaviour should act to counterbalance the potential imbalance created by increased work pressure.

Studies have indeed shown that transformational leadership may alleviate the undesirable influence of job demands, such as work overload, emotional job demands, and physical job demands on burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). Such a buffer effect of leaders' appreciation and support should provide the employees with the necessary tools to cope with demanding stressors at work, even as they happen, that is on a day-to-day basis (Breevaart, Bakker, Hetland, et al., 2014; Breevaart & Bakker, 2018). Additionally, Väänänen and colleagues (2003) argue and show that leaders' appreciation and support facilitate performance, and therefore also may reduce interpersonal conflicts in demanding situations, hence contributing to fewer instances of negative social interactions between colleagues. To our knowledge, only one study has so far examined when such supportive and considerate leadership practices may influence the stressor—bullying relationship. In this multi-level study, Tuckey, Li, and Chen (2017) found that transformational leadership reduced the negative impact of

leaders' task demands on followers' reports of bullying from members of the workgroup.

The above-cited studies have mainly examined the more static between-person effects of transformational leadership on long-term workload. Yet, in the present study we focus on day-to-day dynamics, looking at how a leader may, or may not, influence followers' perception in the "heat of the moment". Accordingly, we expect leaders who get followers to look at problems from various angles, and who help followers to develop their strengths when under pressure, to have a buffering effect on the proposed relationship between daily work pressure and exposure to bullying-related negative acts. In line with the ERI-model, when followers are faced with increased work pressures, this type of leader esteem reward should decrease the risk of follower reports of exposure to bullying-related negative acts that day, as the followers are not experiencing the frustration associated with an effort-reward imbalance.

Hypothesis 2. Daily transformational leadership behaviour moderates the positive relationship between daily work pressure and daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts (buffering effect). This relationship is hypothesized to be weaker on those days when individuals report high (vs. low) levels of transformational leadership behaviours.

1.2.2. The exacerbating effect of daily laissez-faire leadership behaviour

Laissez-faire leadership has been described as a "follower-centred form of avoidance-based leadership by focusing on subordinates' need for leadership, and leader non-response to such needs" (Skogstad et al., 2014, p. 325). As such, laissez-faire leaders may not only fail to create the needed balance when efforts are high, they may even exacerbate the imbalance. In high pressure situations, social support is a valuable resource in that it is functional in achieving work goals, and alleviating the impact of work overload on strain and ill health (Bakker et al., 2005). Laissez-faire leaders, on the other hand, are by definition absent, passive, or avoidant in situations where followers are in need of leadership (Skogstad et al., 2014). Leader absence, passiveness or avoidance implies the violation of followers' legitimate expectations, and as such, may have detrimental outcomes for followers (Skogstad et al., 2017). Furthermore, these leaders may be seen to make an active choice to not provide their followers with the help they require in difficult situations, which is an important component of the esteem rewards conceptualized in the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996). There may, of course, be a range of reasons and leader intents behind such laissez-faire leadership behaviours, including situations where the focal leader may perceive that followers are capable of handling demanding or unsurmountable situations themselves. In any case, from the viewpoint of the subordinate, laissez-faire leadership can be regarded as leader avoidant behaviour where a negligent leader is withholding esteem rewards. This imbalance between follower increased effort on that particular day, and low esteem reward received for that effort by the leader, may leave followers with feelings of frustration and stress, whatever the reason the leader may have for this behaviour. Thus, followers might be more vulnerable to experience negative social interactions, interpersonal conflict episodes, and even acts of workplace bullying on high-pressure days, if their leader is not providing the necessary support and feedback on that particular day.

Even more, the work environment hypothesis proposes a lack of conflict management and constructive intervention as the main reason that the stress and frustration created by bad working conditions may escalate into bullying (Leymann, 1996). Thus,

leaders who, for whatever reason, are absent or neglect their responsibility to adequately address stressful work conditions may inadvertently create a particularly high-risk situation in terms of the development of bullying at work. Furthermore, the high job demands reported by targets may even be indicative of the presence of ambient stressors that are also perceived by potential perpetrators (Balducci, Cecchin, & Fraccaroli, 2012). Thus, on days when targets experience increased levels of stressors, perpetrators may be experiencing many of the same stressors, causing them to act aggressively towards co-workers (Chen & Spector, 1992; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001). If this type of behaviour is not sanctioned by the focal leader, it may send a signal to the perpetrators that such behaviours are acceptable in the organization (Nielsen, 2013; Skogstad et al., 2007), providing a fertile ground for negative acts and bullying to flourish among co-workers. Hence, there are ample theoretical reasons to expect that follower experiences of laissez-faire leadership may exacerbate the negative effects of other workplace stressors.

Several studies have in fact shown that laissez-faire leadership is associated with reports of workplace bullying, particularly in combination with given job stressors (Hauge et al., 2007; Hoel et al., 2010; Skogstad et al., 2007). In a longitudinal study, with a moderated-mediation design, Glambek, Skogstad, and Einarsen (2018) found that laissez-faire leadership negatively moderated the relationship between workplace bullying and job insecurity, through the continued exposure to negative acts. Likewise, Ågotnes and colleagues (2018) showed in a prospective study that laissez-faire leadership strengthened the relationship between interpersonal conflicts with colleagues and the probability of becoming a victim of workplace bullying two years later. Based on empirical findings and theoretical notions from the effort-reward imbalance model and the work environment hypothesis, we propose that on days the cadets experience that their immediate supervisor avoids making decisions or delays responding to urgent questions in situations with high work pressure, those cadets will report higher exposure to bullying-related negative acts than on days they do not report laissez-faire behaviour from their immediate supervisor.

Hypothesis 3. Daily laissez-faire leadership behaviour moderates the positive relationship between daily work pressure and daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts (exacerbating effect). This relationship is hypothesized to be stronger on those days when the individuals report high (vs. low) levels of laissez-faire leadership behaviour.

Fig. 1 summarizes the proposed relationships and hypotheses to be investigated in the present study.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

Data collection was undertaken in 2011, amongst Norwegian naval cadets (N = 61) from a Military University College crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a tall ship as part of their education and training. This represents a unique opportunity to examine the study variables in a complex, shifting yet continuous work environment. In this context, the cadets are socially isolated from the outside world for an extended period, with limited opportunity for outside communications. Furthermore, they are operating in a low technology environment, meaning that many operations that are automated on a modern ship, has to be done manually by the crew, for example in terms of sail-manoeuvres or anchoring procedures. Consequently, working aboard this tall ship is physically challenging, there is a high degree of interdependence in the completion of work tasks, and any errors may result in a number of high-
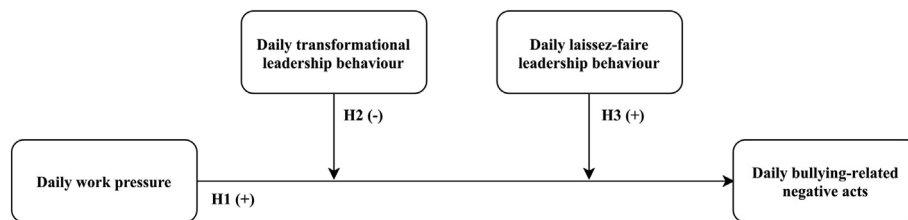
Fig. 1. Summarizes the proposed relationships and hypotheses to be investigated in the present study.

risk situations. Furthermore, the cadets continuously interact with each other and have few opportunities to retreat. They live in close quarters and sleep in hammocks side by side. The weather conditions of such a voyage are highly unpredictable, and sometimes very challenging, as the voyage was undertaken during storm-season. The tall ship had to be operated 24/7, with teams of cadets working in shifts of 4 h on and 8 h off. In addition to their shift-work, these cadets were also studying for an academic degree, meaning that they spent most of their time off shift preparing for exams.

During their voyage, the cadets completed a daily survey measuring variations in work pressure, leadership behaviour and exposure to bullying-related negative acts – among other variables – for 36 consecutive days. In the instructions, the cadets were asked to complete the daily questionnaire at 5 p.m. each day. The cadets were part of one of eight teams, where members took turns in the role of team leader. Cadets were therefore asked to rate the leadership behaviour of their acting immediate superior that day. Prior to the voyage, we presented the cadets with an informed consent form, which they all chose to sign.

The sample consisted of 49 male participants (80.3%) and 7 female participants (11.5%). Five participants did not report their gender (8.2%). The mean age of the participants was 23.9 years (SD = 3.21). Of the 61 cadets that participated in the study, 56 completed a general questionnaire prior to the voyage, yielding a response rate of 91.8% at the person-level. On the daily questionnaire, we obtained 1509 of the possible 2196 possible observations, yielding a response rate of 68.7% at the day-level. Since this response rate is exceptionally high, we checked whether the responses were invalid (e.g., abnormal distributions, same answers throughout the diary, etc.). We found no indications for invalidity. The participants were informed that the data would be used for personal feedback sessions during the return voyage, which could have contributed to the high response rate.

2.2. Measures

All study variables were measured using quantitative daily diaries, with adapted versions of existing scales. The time frame of the scales and the number of questions were adapted so the questions could be answered on a daily basis (cf. Ohly, Sonnentag, Niessen, & Zapf, 2010). Moreover, the questionnaires were reduced in length when possible, as we asked the cadets to fill out the diary on 36 days of their journey.

Day-level work pressure was measured using four items from the subscale "Pace and amount of work" from the questionnaire on the experience and assessment of work (VBBA; Van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994). The items were: "Today, to what extent did you" "… have to work very fast" "… have too much work to do" "… have to work very hard in order to complete something" and "… work under time pressure". The scale consists of five response categories ranging from (1) not at all to (5) to a great extent. Reliability of the daily measures was calculated using the approach described by

Geldhof, Preacher, and Zyphur (2014), by estimating omega (ω) at the within-person level and between-person level using a two-level CFA. Work pressure had high reliability both at the within-person level ($\omega = 0.88$) and at the between-person level ($\omega = 0.97$).

Day-level exposure to bullying-related negative acts was measured using an adapted four-item version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R; Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; S-NAQ; Notelaers, Van der Heijden, Hoel, & Einarsen, 2019) intended for daily diary studies (see Hoprekstad et al., 2019 for a detailed account of the adaption process). The time-frame reference provided to the respondents was changed from the original "the last six months" to "during today's shift". The items were: "repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes", "being ignored or excluded" "practical jokes carried out by people you don't get along with" and "being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger". The scale consisted of four response categories, ranging from (1) not at all to (4) several times. We created an index of day-level exposure to bullying-related negative acts by calculating the mean of the corresponding exposure on that particular day, where higher scores refer to higher levels of exposure to bullying-related negative acts. We did not expect that such a scale would have a high internal consistency as the scale may be looked upon as a formative measure in this study (see e.g. Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006; Hoprekstad et al., 2019). However, for the sake of transparency, we report the reliability estimates for daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts. In the present sample, we found an acceptable reliability at both the within-person level ($\omega = 0.68$) and at the between-person level ($\omega = 0.69$). Additionally, and following the recommendation of Ohly and colleauges (2010), we compared this shortened scale to the longer versions, using data from a representative sample of Norwegian employees. The scaled used in the present study correlated highly with the longer versions (NAQ-R: $r = 0.851$, $p < .01$; S-NAQ: $r = 0.909$, $p < .01$), suggesting that the use of these four items to measure exposure to bullying-related negative acts at work is valid.

Day-level transformational leadership behaviour was measured using five items adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ X5; Avolio & Bass, 2004), representing each of the four sub-categories of transformational leadership. This shortened day-level version of the scale has been published in a study by Breevaart, Bakker, and Demerouti (2014). The items were: "During the last 24 h, my closest supervisor": "… got others to look at problems from many different angles" (Intellectual Stimulation), "… helped others to develop their strengths" (Individualized Consideration), "… emphasized the importance of having a collective sense of mission" (Idealized Influence), and, finally, "… talked enthusiastically about what needs to be accomplished" and "… expressed confidence that goals will be achieved" (Inspirational Motivation). Participants could respond to the items using five response categories, ranging from (1) totally disagree to (5) totally agree. An overall index of transformational leadership was computed so that higher scores refer to higher levels of transformational leadership. Daily transformational leadership had

acceptable reliability at the within-person level (ω = .76) and high reliability at the between-person level (ω = 0.90).

Day-level laissez-faire leadership behaviour was measured using three items, adapted to reflect a daily level of measurement, from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ X5; Avolio & Bass, 2004). The items were: "During the last 24 h, my closest supervisor": "… was absent when needed", "… avoided making decisions" and "… delayed responding to urgent questions". The scale consisted of five response categories, ranging from (1) totally disagree to (5) totally agree. An overall index of laissez-faire leadership was computed so that higher scores refer to higher levels of laissez-faire leadership. Daily laissez-faire leadership had acceptable reliability at the within-person level (ω = .77) and high reliability at the between-person level (ω = 0.98).

2.3. Strategy of analysis

In order to capture the multilevel structure of the data, in which daily observations (level 1) were nested within individuals (level 2), multilevel analyses were carried out using MLwiN 3.01 (Charlton, Rasbash, Browne, Healy, & Cameron, 2017). We estimated multilevel correlations and reliability using Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012). In order to facilitate meaningful interpretation of parameter estimates, all day-level predictors were centred at each person's mean. Simple slope tests for hierarchical linear models were used to examine whether the slopes in the interaction were significantly different from zero (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Means, standard deviations, as well as day- and person-level correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1.

3.2. Multilevel analyses

Prior to testing the predicted models, we tested an unpredicted model (null model) in order to confirm that there is sufficient day-level variance in the current dependent variable. As shown in Table 2, the initial unpredicted model revealed significant variation in exposure to bullying-related negative acts at both the day-level (82.6%) and person-level (17.4%), allowing us to continue with the predicted models. Furthermore, the between-person variance was 24.8% for work pressure, 20.5% for transformational leadership, and 35.0% for laissez-faire leadership, leaving between 65.0% and 79.5% of the variance to be explained at the within-person level.

Hypothesis 1 stated that daily work pressure would be positively related to daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts. The main effects model revealed a significant positive main effect of daily levels of work pressure on daily levels of exposure to bullying-related negative acts (B = 0.026, p < .001), supporting Hypothesis 1.

Even though the effect was relatively small, on days the cadets were exposed to higher work pressure, for example when they needed to deal with stormy weather in addition to their assigned work tasks, they were more likely to be exposed to bullying-related negative acts. In addition, we found a significant main effect of daily laissez-faire leadership behaviour (B = 0.016, p < .05), although not specifically hypothesized. That is, on days the cadets reported high levels of laissez-faire leadership behaviour by their immediate supervisor, they also reported increased levels of exposure to bullying-related negative acts.

Hypothesis 2 and 3 stated that day-level leadership would moderate the expected relationship between daily levels of work pressure and daily levels of bullying-related negative acts. Specifically, in Hypothesis 2 transformational leadership behaviour was thought to buffer this relationship, while in Hypothesis 3, laissez-faire leadership behaviour was thought to exacerbate this relationship. Contrary to our predictions, the interaction model did not show support for an interaction between daily work pressure and daily transformational leadership on daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts (B = 0.009, n. s.). Accordingly, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. There was, however, a significant interaction effect of daily work pressure and daily laissez-faire leadership behaviour on cadets' daily levels of exposure to bullying-related negative acts in the interaction model (B = 0.040, p < .001), supporting Hypothesis 3. Specifically, the relationship between work pressure and exposure to bullying-related negative acts was stronger on days the cadets reported higher levels of laissez-faire leadership behaviour. This interaction is illustrated in Fig. 2, showing the effect at different levels of daily laissez-faire leadership (±1 SD).

In line with Hypothesis 3, Fig. 1 indicates a positive relationship between daily work pressure and daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts on days the cadets report higher levels of laissez-faire leadership behaviour. On days cadets report low levels of laissez-faire leadership, the figure indicates no increase in exposure to bullying-related negative acts at higher levels of work pressure. This is also supported by simple slope tests, where the positive slope for high levels of laissez-faire leadership was significant (Slope = 0.053, z = 7.743, p < .001), whereas the slope for low levels of laissez-faire leadership was not (Slope = −0.001, z = 0.131, n. s.).

4. Discussion

The present study makes three important contributions to the literature on workplace bullying and negative social interactions at work. First, applying a daily diary design, we demonstrate a short-term effect of daily work pressure on daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts at work, supporting the theoretical underpinnings of the work environment hypothesis and the effort-reward imbalance model for each single bullying-related episode. Furthermore, the fact that this relationship is present at the daily level adds to the literature on both stressors and bullying, in that it shows just how quickly stressors in the workplace can trigger

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and day and person level correlations for all study variables (N = 1517 observations, N = 61 respondents).

Variables	x	SD	ICC[a]	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Work pressure	2.242	.784	.248	—	.021	.008	.002
2. Transformational leadership	3.486	.572	.205	.061[***]	—	-.031[*]	.005[*]
3. Laissez-faire leadership	2.013	.673	.350	-.002	-.063[***]	—	.000
4. Bullying-related negative acts	1.055	.149	.174	.012[***]	.002	.004[*]	—

Note: a
ICC= Person-level intraclass correlation. Correlations below the diagonal are correlations on the within (day) level and correlations above the diagonal are correlations on the between (person) level. *** p < .001, *p < .05.

Table 2
Multilevel estimates for the prediction of daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts (NAQ).

	Null model		Main model		Interaction model	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	1.060[a]	.009	1.060[a]	.009	1.059[a]	.009
Work pressure			.026[a]	.005	.026[a]	.005
Transformational leadership			.007	.007	.007	.007
Laissez-faire leadership			.016[c]	.007	.016[b]	.007
Work pressure × transformational leadership					.009	.010
Work pressure × laissez-faire leadership					.040[a]	.009
Variance level 1 (day-level)	.019 (82.6%)	.001	.018	.001	.018	.001
Variance level 2 (person-level)	.004 (17.4%)	.001	.004	.001	.004	.001
−2 log likelihood	−1623.52		−1622.82		−1640.71	

Note. N = 1493 observations; N = 56 respondents.
[a] $p < .001$.
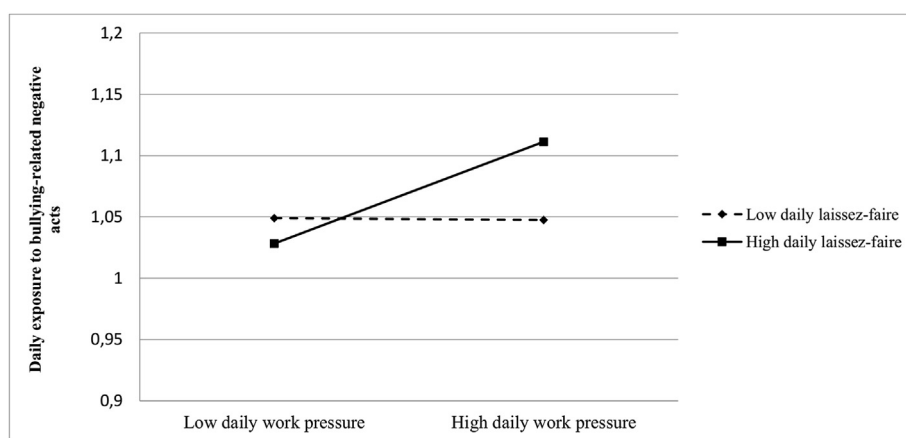[b] $p < .01$.
[c] $p < .05$.

Fig. 2. The relationship between daily work pressure and daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts, moderated by daily laissez-faire leadership behaviour.

negative social interactions and thereby potentially trigger, facilitate or further escalate a bullying process. Second, we show how leadership may and may not be important for such perceived social interactions on days with high work pressure. In this, we found that daily transformational leadership did not act as a buffer while daily laissez-faire leadership acted as a facilitator in the expected relationship between daily work pressure and daily reports of exposure to bullying-related negative acts. Finally, by contrasting these two leadership behaviours in a unique setting, focusing on day-to-day fluctuations and events, we substantiate that laissez-faire leadership behaviours have unfavourable effects in high-pressure situations, and that these effects are immediate. Accordingly, laissez-faire leadership does not only have a long-term effect on bullying as shown in previous studies.

In support of Hypothesis 1, our results showed a significant positive relationship between daily work pressure and daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts. This result is in line with the work environment hypothesis, in that negative acts and bullying seems to be a consequence of prevailing problems in the work environment (Leymann, 1996), including work pressure. Furthermore, as argued in the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996), this process may be explained by an experienced imbalance between the increase in effort (i.e. work pressure) and available resources, resulting in rather immediate feelings of stress and frustration, and alterations in behaviours and perceptions. According to the ERI-model, these negative emotions leave the employees more vulnerable to conflict episodes and therefore to exposure to bullying-related negative acts. From an empirical point

of view, our result is also in line with previous studies in the field applying other research designs (see Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Notelaers et al., 2009). Furthermore, although the present study investigated exposure to bullying-related negative acts as discrete events on a day-to-day basis, rather than cases of full-blown workplace bullying, our results show the same trends as previous studies that have investigated work environment predictors of workplace bullying over longer periods of time (see Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Van den Brande et al., 2016).

Hypothesis 2, stating that daily transformational leadership behaviour would buffer the relationship between work pressure and exposure to bullying-related negative acts, was not supported. Applying the effort-reward imbalance model, we hypothesized that transformational leadership would provide the cadets with the appropriate esteem reward in situations where they need to increase their effort (i.e. work pressure). We argued that on days where both work pressure (effort) and transformational leadership behaviour (esteem reward) were high, cadets would not be experiencing an imbalance between effort made and rewards received, and thus would not face the negative strain associated with such an imbalance (hence making them report less bullying-related negative acts). However, as transformational leadership is a multi-faceted construct, there may also be other mechanisms in play, which could potentially affect the relationship in the opposite direction. For example, transformational leadership in a situation with high work pressure might also represent a potential mismatch between the leader's focus and the situation. Transformational leaders set challenging expectations and motivate followers to go

even further and aim higher (Bass, 1990). In highly stressful work situations, such encouragement may exacerbate already existing work pressure, resulting in even more perceived work stress. Hence, these leadership behaviours may counteract any buffering effect of the supportive aspects of transformational leadership. Therefore, the behaviour of leaders must be both matched and unified in relation to a given work situation, in order to be effective in preventing negative acts and bullying (Tuckey et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the results in the present study show that the daily transformational behaviour of the leader does not act as a buffer in the daily work pressure-negative acts relationship.

Hypothesis 3, proposing that daily laissez-faire leadership would moderate the relationship between daily work pressure and daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts, was supported. More specifically, the relationship between work pressure and exposure to bullying-related negative acts was stronger on those days when the cadets reported higher levels of laissez-faire behaviour from their immediate superior. However, the same relationship was not present on days with low levels of reported laissez-faire leadership behaviour. Thus, exposure to bullying-related negative acts seems to be particularly prevalent on days and in situations where the leader is inactive and/or avoids intervening in and managing situations perceived as stressful by a given employee. Such lack of constructive intervention in unfavourable working situations is likely to sustain, and even increase the feelings of stress and frustration in exposed followers, leaving them at an increased risk of exposure to bullying-related negative acts. This adds support to the work environment hypothesis (Leymann, 1996) by showing that it is the combination of stressful working conditions and inadequate leadership when there is a follower need for leadership, in particular, that creates a fertile ground for bullying at work. Furthermore, perpetrators may view the non-response from the leader as a signal that their behaviour is acceptable by not being sanctioned (Nielsen, 2013; Skogstad et al., 2007), hence allowing for these negative acts to continue and even develop further. In addition, and in line with the theoretical assumptions in the ERI-model, it seems that by ignoring the strain of their followers' high effort in stressful situations, and not providing them with the necessary esteem rewards for these efforts, laissez-faire leaders leave these followers more vulnerable to exposure to bullying-related negative acts, possibly also lowering their threshold of reporting such experiences.

In addition to the hypothesized relationships, our analysis revealed that on days the cadets reported high levels of laissez-faire leadership behaviour by their immediate superior, they also reported increased levels of exposure to bullying-related negative acts, irrespective of other stressors (see Table 2). Although this main effect is quite small, it seems to suggest that laissez-faire leadership is an important and detrimental workplace stressor in its own right (Skogstad et al., 2017). This may be explained by the fact that laissez-faire leaders by definition are not present when needed (Skogstad et al., 2014), and thus turn a blind eye and do not intervene when other team members are being exposed to bullying-related behaviours. In extreme situations, the lack of support from the leader could make team members feel socially excluded and ostracized which again could lead to reports of bullying (Hoel et al., 2010; Skogstad et al., 2007).

4.1. Methodological considerations

A notable strength of the present study is the use of a daily diary design, which allows us to study the impact of daily fluctuations of work pressure and leadership behaviours on daily exposure to bullying-related negative acts. Furthermore, this method provided a unique opportunity to study these relationships within a natural work context as they play out on a day-to-day basis (Ohly et al., 2010). The context was a highly controlled one, but at the same time dynamic, as the cadets continuously switched positions and learned new skills. Weather and climatic conditions also vary across the journey, providing variations in the contextual demands. Finally, the daily diary design reduces the risk of retrospective bias (Reis & Gable, 2000), which can be a threat to the validity of more general surveys.

However, although the present study has clear strengths due to its research design, it is not without limitations, some specific as well as some general ones. A general limitation is the problem of common method variance due to self-reports (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Spector, Rosen, Richardson, Williams, & Johnson, 2017). However, common method variance is considered as less of a problem in interaction regression models (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010), as interaction effects are deflated (rather than inflated) by CMV, making them more difficult to detect. Therefore, we do not consider this a major concern in the present study when looking at how leadership may buffer or strengthen the relationship between work pressure and exposure to bullying-related negative acts.

The use of a highly selected sample of naval cadets on a tall ship journey — with a predominance of fit and highly selected young men — may raise questions of the generalizability of our findings. Regarding the work pressure—bullying relationship, these respondents should be highly trained to tackle work pressure, to restrain from behaving destructively, and to be resistant when it comes to negative social behaviours by others. However, we do have strong theoretical and empirical reasoning for the proposed relationships between our study variables, and these are not context-specific and should not be restricted to such a population. Hence, there is reason to believe that our results also hold true and may even be stronger in other work contexts.

Furthermore, our result of the relationship between work pressure and negative acts remain correlational in nature and do therefore strictly speaking not allow for causal conclusions about within-person effects across days (Taris & Kompier, 2014). However, as we theorized in our hypotheses that the effects would occur within the same day, we did not presume to say anything about the causality of the relationships (see e.g. Breevaart, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2014). Nevertheless, future research should employ alternative research designs in order to clarify directions of causality, both within- and between persons.

Finally, one may also see the low prevalence of the bullying-related negative acts as a limitation of the study. In the present study, the mean score of daily bullying-related negative acts was only 1.06, indicating that negative acts are very rare in this sample. Note, however, that we examined bullying related negative acts on a day-to-day basis, rather than an accumulated score of the exposure during a longer period, e.g. the previous six months. Moreover, it is important to take into consideration that the naval cadets represent a selective group that undergo leadership training in a highly structured environment, where most forms of bullying behaviours will be open to both bystanders and supervisors, which in itself may act to prevent such bullying incidents. Furthermore, the findings are mainly as predicted, yet indicating that it is laissez-faire rather than transformational leadership that does the trick.

4.2. Theoretical and practical implications

The present study adds to the long line of research supporting the theoretical notion that workplace bullying and harassment seem to particularly flourish in environments in which unfavourable working conditions and inadequate leadership are prevalent (see e.g. Van den Brande et al., 2016, for an overview).

Furthermore, by showing that laissez-faire leadership behaviour facilitates the cadets' exposure to bullying-related negative acts on days with high work pressure, our findings extend the results of previous studies substantiating that the experience of a laissez-faire leadership style will allow interpersonal tensions to escalate into bullying behaviours, which then may continue and escalate further over time (Glambek et al., 2018; Ågotnes et al., 2018). In this, our study also adds to the scarce knowledge of the conditions in which workplace stressors are transformed into perceptions of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Rai & Agarwal, 2018).

Furthermore, our study also contributes to the stressor and bullying literature by showing just how quickly stressors in the workplace may trigger negative social interactions and thereby potentially facilitate the start of a bullying process. Therefore, an important theoretical contribution made by the present study is that this effect is not necessarily down to a long-term exposure to stressors. The process may evidently happen quite quickly and may even happen as results of daily fluctuations. Hence, these mechanisms may therefore be even more potent than previously thought.

Our results also have several practical implications. First, the design of the present study, examining short-term (day-level) effects of work pressure on exposure to bullying-related negative acts, may be of practical significance to organizations in general. As we know from previous research, workplace bullying may be the outcome of a gradually escalating process based on increasingly frequent exposure to the negative acts examined in the present study (Einarsen et al., 2020). The results from the present study add to our understanding of this escalating process, by showing that stressors in the work environment may lead to immediate exposure to such negative behaviours (i.e. within the same day). Therefore, it is important for managers to be aware of these risk factors in order to intervene early in a conflict-escalating process that otherwise might end in bullying. For example, followers working under the conditions of a laissez-faire leader in a stressful work environment may result in highly escalated, full-blown cases of workplace bullying (Ågotnes et al., 2018). Furthermore, our results suggest that such early interventions should not only include conflict management in specific episodes, but also preventative steps to reduce the overall levels of all employees' (including leaders') work pressure, which may be a root cause of bullying-related negative acts (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011). In this, organizations may be able to prevent these day-to-day episodic negative behaviours from developing further and possibly resulting in full-blown cases of workplace bullying.

Our findings also indicate some important implications for the way organizations regard leadership and management development. Traditionally, the focus of most leadership and managerial training programs has been the acquisition of individual knowledge, skills, and abilities (i.e. competencies), in an effort to bring about effective leadership (Day & Dragoni, 2015). However, what seems lacking in such leadership development programs is creating awareness of — as well as developing strategies for reducing — the occurrence of passive-avoidant destructive leadership behaviours, such as laissez-faire leadership (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2018). This point seems particularly striking considering the results of the present study, where we found that laissez-faire leadership behaviour facilitated the development of workplace bullying, whereas transformational leadership behaviour did not have an equivalent buffering effect.

Another important organizational factor that so far has been neglected in the discussion of leadership and management development is the concept of climate for conflict management (CCM). The concept entails the perception of employees that their organization generally manages interpersonal conflicts well and fairly,

and that benefits and burdens within the organization are fairly distributed (Rivlin, 2001). Zahlquist, Hetland, Skogstad, Bakker, and Einarsen (2019) argue and substantiate that a strong CCM may play an important role in preventing sour psychosocial work environments, characterized by high levels of frustration, from developing into persistent bullying situations. Consequently, taking steps to improve the overall conflict management climate and the perception of fairness in the organization may be a highly effective way of preventing bullying in the workplace.

5. Conclusion

This daily diary study revealed that on days with high levels of work pressure and high levels of laissez-faire leadership behaviour, cadets reported increased exposure to bullying-related negative acts, a finding in line with the work environment hypothesis. Furthermore, our results showed that laissez-faire leadership exacerbated the relationship between work pressure and exposure to bullying-related negative acts on a day-to-day basis, whereas transformational leadership did not help to weaken the same relationship. Thus, bullying episodes seems to be particularly prevalent on days and in situations where the leader avoids intervening in and helping their followers in the management of stressful situations in the workplace. This is in line with the theoretical notions presented in the work environment hypothesis and the effort-reward imbalance model. Furthermore, the non-significant interaction of transformational leadership behaviour indicates that steps to promote constructive forms of leadership would probably not be very effective in preventing workplace bullying on a day-to-day basis. Instead, organizations should emphasize the prevention of work pressures in general, and even more so implement necessary measures to minimize the prevalence of passive-avoidant forms of leadership in critical situations where the followers are in need of leader support, such as conflict escalations.

Acknowledgements

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