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DEPARTMENT of PSYCHOLOGY

The relationship between destructive leadership, organizational culture, and workplace bullying.

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Master's Thesis (30 hp)
Spring 2018

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Abstract

An increased focus on bad leaders and toxic workplaces in recent years has led many to question how a single leader can have such a large effect on an organization. It is becoming more apparent that a relationship exists between leadership, workplace culture, and employee behavior that may explain how destructive leadership can become so widespread. This study examines the effects of perceived destructive leadership on how employees view the ethical culture of their workplace, and how they treat their fellow coworkers. 97 participants participated in an online questionnaire asking them about their perception of their leader, the culture of their workplace, and the extent to which they had bullied coworkers within the past six months. The results showed that destructive leadership significantly predicted an unethical workplace culture, and that an unethical workplace culture significantly predicted higher rates of employee bullying. However, there was no significant direct relationship found between destructive leadership and employee bullying. These findings suggest that it is not only leaders that can perpetuate destruction throughout an organization, but that culture and employees play a significant role as well.

Key words: Destructive leadership, organizational culture, workplace bullying

The Relationship Between Destructive Leadership, Organizational Culture, and Workplace

Bullying

The vast majority of the working population spend at least one third of their days at work, making it a central point in their lives. It is therefore not surprising that the working environment, including bosses, colleagues, and workplace culture, can have a profound impact on an individual. Unfortunately, many workers find themselves in a workplace in which leadership is awful, the culture is a disaster, and their coworkers are buckling under the pressure. Destructive leadership has begun to make headlines in recent years, with several high-profile cases making it into the media. Volkswagen, who was exposed for fraud after employees were found to be manipulating emissions in a large number of diesel engines, the famous Enron scandal culminating in bankruptcy, and the recent accusations against Harvey Weinstein all feature a common theme of destructive leaders, toxic organizational cultures and a number of employees that allowed the destruction to thrive (Farrow, 2017; Johnson, 2003; Smith & Parloff, 2016).

It is becoming more apparent that both culture and employees play a role in the negative outcomes of destructive leadership. In the above examples, every leader relied upon a working culture in which their bad behavior went unpunished and where followers would collude or perpetuate their poor behaviors. Weinstein relied upon various assistants and fellow executives to cover up the aftermath of his abuses; multiple executives and auditors were charged in the Enron scandal for their role in obscuring records; and Volkswagen engineers were responsible for deliberately developing and concealing the use of software to hide engine emissions. Certain researchers have therefore begun to examine not only leaders, but the behaviors of followers as well, to determine how their conduct affects an organization (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2007).

Clearly the effects of destructive leadership extend far beyond the leader's immediate reach. Present-day focus is shifting from a pure leadership perspective to how culture, leadership, and employee behavior work synergistically to create a toxic workplace that has a negative net effect on an organization (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Researchers have begun to find that not only are employees significantly affected by leadership behavior, they may in fact perpetuate the destruction themselves (Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012; Mawritz, Resick, & Dust, 2014). In the above cases, although much of the blame was placed on leaders, employee behavior played a significant role in the spread of the destruction.

The behavior of employees has already been a focus for many years in the form of bullying research (Coyne, Chong, Seigne, & Randall, 2003). Many researchers have been interested in the cause of workplace bullying, though little research to date has examined the relationship between leadership style and workplace bullying. Even fewer researchers have investigated the role that workplace culture has to play in the occurrence of workplace bullying. The purpose of this study therefore was firstly to investigate whether destructive leadership predicted bullying behavior in employees, and whether this relationship was mediated by organizational culture. It also sought to investigate whether destructive leadership significantly predicted a negative workplace culture overall. In the following literature review, a broad overview of the current destructive leadership research is discussed, followed by a summary of findings related to organizational culture and employee behavior. Lastly, the present study is discussed.

Destructive leadership

No standard definition of destructive leadership currently exists in literature. Most researchers acknowledge that destructive leadership styles can vary widely. Laissez Faire

leadership, for example, employs passive forms of leadership behavior, compared to tyrannical leadership which involves more active and aggressive behavior (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). Einarsen and colleagues created a broad definition describing destructive leadership as systematic or recurring behavior by a leader that is antithetical to an organizations goals and/or to employees' well-being (Einarsen et al., 2007). According to this definition, the behaviors do not need to be deliberate, but they must occur more than once (i.e. cannot be explained by a supervisor having a bad day) and they must disrupt or hinder the organizations goals or interests. Furthermore, all types of destructive leadership behavior are included in the definition, including passive or nonverbal behavior as well as more obvious, aggressive behaviors. This definition allows researchers to examine the multitude of ways destructive leadership may manifest within organizations.

The estimates of the prevalence of destructive leadership vary depending on which perimeters are studied. A study conducted in Norway found prevalence rates of destructive leadership between 33.5% and 61%, depending on destructive leadership style (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010). 13.6% of US workers reported exposure to abusive supervisors (Tepper, 2007) and around 11% reported the same in the Netherlands (Hubert & van Veldhoven, 2001). This is clearly not an uncommon phenomenon for organizations and employees and the research in this area requires more knowledge in order to effectively understand and tackle the problem.

The effects of destructive leadership are far-reaching and can have exponential effects on an organization when left unchecked. In a meta-analysis examining the effects of destructive leaders on employees, researchers found large positive correlations between destructive leadership and negative attitudes towards the leader, turnover intention, resistance towards the leader, low individual performance, and counterproductive work behavior (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Counterproductive work behavior was the second highest

correlation behind attitude towards leader, meaning organizations have a vested interest in dealing with destructive leadership if they wish to mitigate the damage it has on the business.

Some studies, however, have argued that destructive leadership is useful to organizations in certain situations. A qualitative study found that performance increased among employees under a tyrannical manager (Ma, Karri, & Chittipeddi, 2004). They argued that certain leadership behaviors such as aggression and bullying can lead to followers more strictly adhering to rules and increasing productivity. A curvilinear relationship was also found in two studies between leaders' bullying behavior and creativity among workers, where a moderate level of destructive leadership leads to better creativity and job performance compared to low and high levels of bullying (Giorgi, Leon-Perez, & Arenas, 2015; S. Lee, Yun, & Srivastava, 2013). These studies follow the thinking that sometimes a rigid, strict, or unyielding boss is sometimes needed to ensure compliance among employees. However, the vast majority of research disputes this claim as the detrimental effects to an organization are often far greater than the rewards.

At an individual level, many studies have demonstrated that destructive leadership has a significant negative impact on employees. Researchers have found a significant positive relationship between abusive supervision and stress (Samuel Aryee, Li-Yun Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008; Haider, Nisar, Baig, Azeem, & Waseem-ul-Hameed, 2018; Rafferty AE, Restubog SLD, & Jimmieson NL, 2010), problem drinking (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006), sleep deprivation and emotional exhaustion (Han, Harms, & Bai, 2017), and negative affect (Tepper et al., 2009). In addition, significant negative correlations have been found between destructive leadership and innovation (Xuanfang Hou, 2017), well-being (M. Sandy Hershcovis & Julian Barling, 2010), and individual performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007). Ultimately, these effects on an individual harm an organization's goals in the long run as performance declines and turnover increases.

There are a number of studies outlining various reasons for destructive leadership. Hu and Liu (2016) found that abusive supervisors tended to proactively become abusive in response to a high social dominance orientation and a concern for maintaining status in the workplace. There is some research to show that abusive supervision becomes passed down through organizational levels (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009) and there is also the previously mentioned thinking that sometimes rigidity and bullying is useful in achieving organizational goals (Ma et al., 2004). All of these factors may lead to destructive leadership becoming prevalent in a workplace, but researchers have yet to gain a comprehensive picture of why exactly it occurs, and it is therefore important to examine further how this leadership style manages to thrive in so many organizations.

Organizational culture

The connection between organization culture and leadership was first proposed in a study in 1989, establishing a link between the two domains in the workplace (Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989). The authors posited that the perception of organizational climate was influenced by their relationship with their leader. This was the first step in establishing a link between the two and confirming that the effects of leadership are not limited to the relationship between leader and follower. Indeed, some researchers have gone on to claim that the concept of leadership is central to organizational culture in itself (Schein, 2016). The two are clearly linked, although much of the current research on destructive leadership tends to take a leadership-focused approach and neglect the role of culture.

Recently, a more holistic approach to destructive leadership has been introduced (Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013). A theory has emerged from the destructive leadership literature in an attempt to explain how destructive leadership is perpetuated within an organization beyond the leader's actions. It is known as the toxic

triangle, and describes the interplay between leadership behavior, organizational culture, and employee behavior that makes destructive leadership possible. Padilla et al. (2007) explained the theory using Fidel Castro's career as an example and argued that it was impossible for destructive leadership to arise without the other key components; *conducive environments* and *susceptible followers*. The author later went on to examine the Penn State Scandal, in which a prominent university coach sexually abused children in his care for decades. There is evidence that a number of adults were aware of the crimes and did not act, which Padilla and colleagues describe as an example of a conducive environment within an organization, with a centralized power dynamic with little oversight of what the leader was doing from other members of the organization (Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013). In that case, a lack of oversight and a culture of idol worship of certain leaders allowed the destructive leadership to flourish. This research has demonstrated a need for more research into how exactly organizational culture and leadership work together.

   A study demonstrating how leaders can influence workplace culture found that ethical leadership significantly influenced the ethical culture of an organization (Schaubroeck et al., 2012) in several different ways. The researchers found that ethical leaders not only influenced those directly in contact with them, but that their ethical values became embedded within the culture of the organization as well. This embedding of ethical values within the organization led to an indirect influence on follower behavior at lower levels in the hierarchy. This suggests how it is not only immediate subordinates who are affected by a leader, but that leadership style filters down through an organization via culture and indirectly influences how followers at lower levels behave. A destructive leader placed in a high position of power within a company may embed their values within the organizations culture, causing a cascading effect throughout the company leading to destructive behaviors spreading through the organization.

Following on from this, several studies have found that culture can have a buffering or mediating effect on the negative outcomes of destructive leadership. A study examined the effects of a "hostile climate" on followers. They found that not only did a "hostile climate" affect the performance of employees significantly, this effect was also shown to be at least partially transmitted via abusive supervisors (Mawritz, Resick, & Dust, 2014), who either buffered or magnified the effects of the hostile climate, depending on their level of conscientiousness. Interestingly, when these supervisors were highly conscientious, they were able to intercept the hostile behaviors and culture of the company, but when they were low in conscientiousness, they were significantly influenced by the working climate and passed that on to their subordinates, who reacted with psychological withdrawal. These studies demonstrate that leaders not only significantly influence culture, but that organizational culture itself becomes a vehicle for how leadership is passed down to lower levels of an organization. When there is destructive leadership present in a workplace, it is possible that organizational culture and employees may perpetuate the toxicity of destructive leadership.

In support of this, a study investigating various measures of workplace culture (constructive leadership, perceived organizational support, and anti-bullying actions) found that perceived organizational support significantly buffered the effects of bullying on performance (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2013). When there was low perceived organizational support, the effects of bullying had a significant negative effect on performance. It is likely that poor leadership leads to a culture in which employees do not believe they are likely to receive help from their leaders, and thus their performance drops, affecting the organization as a whole. As explained in the toxic triangle theory, low perceived organizational support may be considered part of a *conducive environment* in which destructive leadership and behaviors are allowed to thrive.

Overall it is clear that the ethical culture of an organization is significantly affected by the style of leadership and that this may in turn have a significant impact on employees. It is therefore an important factor to take into account when examining destructive leadership.

Employee behavior and the toxic triangle

As mentioned previously, there is another element to the toxic triangle theory – *susceptible followers*. Padilla and colleagues (2007) claim that these followers play a crucial role in the leadership process.

Little empirical research has been done on these susceptible followers, though a number of qualitative studies support the theory as a whole (Fraher, 2016; Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013). Padilla et al. (2007) hypothesize a number of characteristics that may be present in susceptible followers, such as negative self-evaluations, ambition, and low maturity.

Literature that draws upon the toxic triangle theory has coined a term known as the "trickle-down effect" to describe how destructive leadership filters down throughout an organization and affects follower behaviors (Aryee et al., 2007; Mawritz et al., 2012; Mayer et al., 2009).

A study examined the effect of upper level management's leadership style on mid-level supervisors and their subordinates (Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012). They found that abusive managers' behavior trickled down to their direct reports, which was then positively related to group interpersonal deviance. Essentially, the destructive behaviors of leaders led to followers engaging in negative behaviors themselves. In addition, they also found that a hostile climate strengthened these relationships, where the more hostile a climate was, the stronger the relationship between abusive supervisors and work group interpersonal deviance. This further supports the concept that organizational culture acts as a

means of indirect influence from leaders. In the case of destructive leadership, organizational culture may become imbued with the leader's values and lead to employees becoming destructive themselves.

Research further supporting this demonstrates that organizational culture is a key antecedent in workplace bullying among employees. Bullying in the workplace is an example of negative behavior exhibited by followers that is at least partly influenced by external antecedents present in the workplace. It has been the subject of a larger body of research than destructive leadership and there is ample evidence demonstrating that workplace bullying is significantly related to leadership behavior and organizational climate (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Due to this relationship between workplace bullying, leadership, and organizational culture, workplace bullying may be a good indicator of the presence of susceptible followers when examining the effects of destructive leadership.

Those that are victims of workplace bullying are more likely to report a negative work culture (Coyne et al., 2003). Similarly, an instrumental ethical climate, where followers are encouraged to act in their own self-interest with no regard for others, also significantly predicts bullying (Füsun Bulutlar & Ela Ünler Öz, 2009). Some researchers have suggested that bullying emerges when workplaces demand toughness from employees through encouraging a culture focused on 'survival of the fittest' (Salin, 2003).

The present study

Researchers have stated that bullying is highest in workplaces where leadership either implicitly or explicitly endorses bullying (Einarsen, 1999; Samnani & Singh, 2012). As mentioned previously, work climate is significant predictor of bullying. Given the findings regarding how ethical leadership embeds itself within an organization via culture, it is likely that once a destructive leader is established within an organization, their ethical values and values regarding treatment of others becomes inserted into the organization's culture. This

culture then in turn has a significant effect on how employees behave. As we can see from this summary of research, the likelihood of workplace bullying then increases.

There is currently a lack of research in the field examining the pathways from leadership to destructive employee behavior, despite growing concerns of how the effects of destructive leadership filter down through an organization to influence workers negatively (Sutton, 2007).

I expect (given the findings, of Mawritz et al., 2012) that destructive leadership will significantly predict both a higher level of workplace bullying and a lower workplace ethical culture, and that the relationship between destructive leadership and workplace bullying will be mediated by workplace ethical culture (Based on the findings from Schaubroeck et al., 2012). Further, I expect that a lower workplace ethical culture will significantly predict workplace bullying (based on the findings by Mayer et al,. 2007 and Shaubroek et al., 2012 demonstrating how the effect of ethical leadership flow downwards through an organization).

Methods

Sample

97 participants completed the survey (67 women; 27 men; 3 other; age M = 32.56; SD = 11.51). 15 were part-time employed and 82 were employed full-time. All worked with some form of supervisor, manager, or boss. Nationality was varied, with 58 from New Zealand, 13 from the United Kingdom, and the rest from Western Europe and Australasia.

Materials

Destructive Leadership. Destructive leadership was measured using a slightly modified version of the Destrudo-L (Larsson, Brandebo, & Nilsson, 2012). The scale has 20 items that measure five areas of destructive leadership including arrogant and unfair (e.g. "I experience that my supervisor is unpleasant), threatening (e.g. I experience that my

supervisor shows violent tendencies), ego-oriented (e.g.I experience that my supervisor does

not trust his/her subordinates), passive (e.g. I experience that my supervisor does not dare to

confront others), and uncertain and messy (e.g. I experience that my supervisor shows

insecurity in his/her role). Some items were altered slightly to make them clearer to native

English speakers (e.g. "I experience that my supervisor puts unreasonable demands" was

modified to "I experience that my supervisor makes unreasonable demands). The word

"supervisor" was also used in place of "superior/commander" to make it more applicable to a

business setting. Responses were made on a 6-item Likert scale, ranging from "1 = never or

almost never" to "6 = very often or always". Cronbach's alpha was .96.

Workplace ethical culture. The Corporate Ethical Virtues Model – short form scale

(Debode, Armenakis, Feild, & Walker, 2014) was used to measure workplace culture. It was

a shortened version of the original Corporate Ethical Virtues Model developed by (Kaptein,

2008). The 32-item scale included items such as "I am not asked to do things that conflict

with my conscience in my immediate working environment" and "If a colleague does

something which is not permitted, my manager will find out about it". Responses were made

on a 6-item Likert scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "6 = strongly agree".

Cronbach's alpha was .96.

Workplace Bullying (Follower Aggression). Due to two scales being used to measure

workplace bullying, they were labelled together as "Follower aggression". The first scale is

referred to as "workplace bullying", and was created by Parkins, Fishbein, & Ritchey (2006).

It consists of a 6-item survey, measured using a 5 point Likert scale. The scale ranged from

"0 = never" to "4 = 4 or more times" and participants are asked to indicate how often they

engaged in the behaviors within the last 6 months. Items included statements like "I ridiculed

or teased another co-worker" and "I purposefully excluded a co-worker from workplace activities". Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .59.

The second scale used was adapted specifically for this study from the Generalized Workplace Harassment Questionnaire by Rospenda and Richman (2004). It is labelled in the present study as "workplace harassment". It consists of 29 items and responses were recorded on a 3-point Likert scale spanning "0 = never", "1 = once" to "2 = more than once". This scale was originally developed to measure the extent to which a participant has perceived harassment towards themselves. To measure follower aggression for the present study, the items were modified to ask about the extent to which the participant had perpetrated the harassment behavior themselves. For example, item number 1; "During the last 12 months at your workplace, how often have you been in a situation where someone in your work setting yelled or screamed at you?" was modified to "During the last 12 months at your workplace, how often have you been in a situation where you yelled or screamed at someone in your work setting?". Every item was modified in this way. Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Procedure

Participants were recruited using online social media tools (Facebook and LinkedIn). A link to the google forms survey was posted on the social media sites by me and Facebook friends. Upon voluntarily clicking on the link, participants were introduced to the study and given a general description about the topic of leadership and workplace culture. To be eligible for participation, participants needed to be currently employed and have a supervisor, manager, or other form of leader as part of their job, which was clarified in the initial demographic questions. If participants answered no to either being employed or having a supervisor, they were thanked for their interest and the study ended. Participants were informed in the introduction that their participation was voluntary and that they could

withdraw at any time by closing the browser window. Once they had finished the survey, they were thanked for their participation and invited to share any comments they had. Contact details of the researcher were provided for any further questions.

Results

Descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics of the study variables are presented in table 1. For destructive leadership, low scores indicated low levels of reported destructive leadership behaviors. Similarly, for both the workplace bullying and workplace harassment scales, low scores indicated few or zero instances of workplace aggression. Higher scores on the workplace ethical culture scale indicated higher levels of ethical culture in an organization. Overall, the prevalence of destructive leadership and both forms of follower aggression was relatively low, while workplace ethical culture was moderately high.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the present study's main variables.*

	Min	1st Quartile	Mean	SD	3rd Quartile	Max
Destructive Leadership	1	1.25	2	1	2.43	4.80
Workplace Culture	2.16	3.58	4.36	.99	5.17	6
Workplace Bullying	1	1	1.46	.57	1.60	3.40
Workplace Harassment	1	1.03	1.20	.21	1.28	2

The top 5 bullying behaviors from each of the follower aggression scales are displayed in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. *Summary of top 5 most frequently reported workplace bullying behaviors*

	Workplace Bullying				
	Total %				
Please rate how frequently you engaged in these behaviours in the workplace in the past 6 months.	*Never*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4 or more times*

I ridiculed or teased another coworker	58.76% $n = 57$	14.43% $n = 14$	15.46% $n = 15$	3.09% $n = 3$	8.25% $n = 8$
I have given a coworker the silent treatment as a response to his/her questions or attempts at conversation.	75.26% $n = 73$	12.37% $n = 12$	7.22% $n = 7$	0% $n = 0$	5.15% $n = 5$
I did not attribute as much value to a coworker's work as he or she deserved.	68.04% $n = 66$	19.59% $n = 19$	10.31% $n = 10$	1.03% $n = 1$	1.03% $n = 1$
I hinted to another coworker that he/she should quit his/her job.	86.86% $n = 84$	6.19% $n = 6$	4.12% $n = 4$	2.06 $n = 2$	1.03% $n = 1$
I purposefully excluded a coworker from workgroup activities.	84.54% $n = 82$	9.28% $n = 9$	2.06% $n = 2$	2.06% $n = 2$	1.03% $n = 1$

For the workplace bullying measure, a higher score on the scale signifies a higher frequency of that type of behavior. For example, a score of three indicates that on average, the behavior occurred three times within the six-month period assessed. The items are ranked according to the overall mean score for each item, meaning that some are ranked above others due to participants reporting a high frequency of the behavior occurring. As seen in *Table 2,* the most frequent behavior was ridiculing or teasing a coworker, which 41.24% of participants reported doing at least once within the past six months.

For the workplace harassment measure, responses are categorized between *never*, *once*, and *more than once* to indicate frequency of each type of behavior (as seen in *Table 3*).

Here the most frequently reported behavior is gossiping about another coworker, with 60.82% of participants reporting engaging in it at least once in the past twelve months.

Table 3. *Summary of top 5 most frequently reported workplace harassment behaviors.*

Workplace Harassment		
Total %		
During the last 12 months at your workplace, how often have you been in a situation where you...		
	Never	*Once*	*More than once*
Gossiped about and/or spread rumors about a colleague?	39.18% $n = 38$	26.80% $n = 26$	34.02% $n = 33$
Made negative comments to a colleague about their intelligence, competence or productivity?	42.27% $n = 41$	26.80% $n = 26$	30.93% $n = 30$
Expected less of a co-worker than others in their position?	62.89% $n = 61$	21.65% $n = 21$	15.46% $n = 15$
Prevented a co-worker from expressing themselves by interrupting them?	74.23% $n = 72$	20.62% $n = 20$	5.15% $n = 5$
Told a co-worker insulting jokes?	79.38% $n = 77$	11.34% $n = 11$	9.28% $n = 9$

Prediction of follower aggression based on destructive leadership. Due to two different scales being used to measure follower aggression, the first set of analyses was conducted using the data collected from Parkins, Fishbein and Ritchey's (2006) scale

(Workplace bullying), then a second set of analyses was conducted hereafter using Rospenda

and Richman's (2004) workplace harassment scale (Workplace harassment).

Table 4. *Pairwise correlations of the study variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Destructive Leadership	1			
2. Workplace Culture	-.65**	1		
3. Workplace Bullying	.140	-.26*	1	
4. Workplace Harassment	.147	-.29**	-	1

* p < .05; **p < .01
Note. N = 97

Firstly, pairwise correlations were calculated to examine the relationships between

variables (see *Table 4*.) Results indicated that there were two significant correlations between

destructive leadership and workplace ethical culture, and workplace ethical culture and

workplace bullying (as seen in *Table 4*), but no significant relationship between destructive

leadership and either workplace bullying or harassment.

To test the first hypothesis that destructive leadership would significantly predict

workplace bullying, a simple linear regression was calculated, with results indicating that

destructive leadership was not a significant predictor of workplace bullying (β=-.14, $t(95)$ =

1.38, p=.170), meaning that there was no significant change in bullying behavior based on

destructive leadership scores.

Next, the alternative follower aggression scale was used to test the hypothesis. A

simple linear regression was calculated to predict workplace harassment based on destructive

leadership. Results indicated that destructive leadership was also not a significant predictor of

workplace harassment (β=.04, $t(95)$ = 1.45, p = .149). Overall, destructive leadership was not

a significant predictor of either type of follower aggression, meaning there was no significant

difference in reported levels of follower aggression based on destructive leadership. There

was therefore no support for the first hypothesis.

Prediction of workplace ethical culture based on destructive leadership. Regression analysis was used to test the second hypothesis that destructive leadership would significantly predict workplace ethical culture. The results supported this hypothesis and indicated that destructive leadership was a significant predictor of workplace ethical culture (β=-1.02, t(95) = -8.33, $p < .001$) and explained a significant portion of the variance in workplace ethical culture scores ($R^2 = .42$, $F(1,95) = 69.37$, $p < .001$). The results showed that the less destructive leadership reported, the greater workplace ethical culture scores were, which provides support for the second hypothesis.

Predicting follower aggression based on workplace ethical culture. Regression analysis was utilized to test the third hypothesis that workplace ethical culture significantly predicts follower aggression. Again, the two follower aggression scales were tested separately. To test, a simple linear regression was calculated with workplace bullying as the dependent variable. The results showed that workplace ethical culture significantly predicted workplace bullying (β=-.02, t(95) = -2.62, $p = .010$). Workplace ethical culture also explained a significant portion of the variance in workplace bullying scores ($R^2 = .07$ ($F(1,95) = 6.85$, $p = .010$). The results showed that the greater the ethical culture scores, the less likely participants were to report high levels of aggression towards coworkers.

To test the alternative follower aggression scale, workplace harassment was entered into a simple linear regression as the dependent variable, with workplace ethical culture again is the predictor variable. The results were significant, showing that workplace ethical culture significantly predicted workplace harassment (β=-.06, t(95) = -2.98, $p = .004$). Workplace ethical culture also explained a significant portion of variance in workplace harassment scores ($R^2 = .09$ ($F(1,95) = 8.85$, $p = .004$). Both of these linear regressions support the third hypothesis and demonstrate that the ethical culture of a workplace significant predicts the

amount of aggression followers display towards each other, with highly ethical workplaces predicting a lower level of follower aggression on both scales.

Mediation analysis. Finally, a 2-stage hierarchical multiple regression was performed to test the mediational hypothesis that destructive leadership predicted follower aggression, mediated by workplace ethical culture (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). Prior to conducting the analysis, the relevant statistical assumptions were assessed. The collinearity statistics (VIF and tolerance) were also within the accepted limits to the assumption of multicollinearity was met (Coakes & Steed, 2009). The Durbin-Watson score was examined and deemed to be within the acceptable limits, satisfying the assumption of independent residual values. Scatterplots and residuals were examined, and the assumption of homoscedasticity, linearity and normality were all fulfilled. (Hair et al., 2006). Cook's distance values were examined to determine whether there were any extreme values, and none were found, satisfying the assumption that there were no influential values that may have biased the model (Cook, 1977).

To test the mediational hypothesis, a two-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with workplace bullying as the dependent variable. Destructive leadership was entered in the first stage to control for the main effect of leadership, followed by workplace ethical culture at stage two to test for the mediation effect. As seen in *Table 5*, the first stage was not significant. At the second stage, the model was significant, but when examining the coefficients, it is clear that only workplace ethical culture significantly predicts workplace bullying. This demonstrates that there is no mediation effect due to the lack of a significant relationship between destructive leadership and workplace bullying. In other words, regardless of the level of destructive leadership in a workplace, only the ethical culture of the workplace significantly affects the bullying behavior of employees, where highly ethical workplaces are negatively correlated with workplace bullying.

Table 5. *Summary of multiple regression analysis predicting workplace bullying.*

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficient		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*P*
Intercept	7.51	.65		11.64	.000
Destructive leadership	.02	.01	.14	1.38	.170
Intercept	12.25	2.23		5.51	.000
Destructive Leadership	-.01	.02	-.05	-.37	.711
Workplace ethical culture	-.03	.01	-.29	-2.22	.029

Note. $R^2 = .02$ for step 1 ($F(1,95) = 1.91$, $p = .170$); $R^2 = .07$ for step 2 ($F(1,95) = 3.47$, $p = .035$)

Lastly, another two-stage hierarchical regression model was conducted with

workplace harassment entered as the dependent, with destructive leadership entered at stage

one and workplace ethical culture at stage two.

Table 6. *Summary of hierarchical multiple regression predicting workplace harassment based on destructive leadership and workplace ethical culture.*

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficient		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*P*
Intercept	33.16	1.35		25.54	.000
Destructive leadership	.04	.03	.15	1.45	.149
Intercept	44.75	4.61		9.70	.000
Destructive Leadership	-.02	.04	-.07	-.56	.574
Workplace ethical culture	-.06	.03	-.34	-2.62	.010

Note. $R^2 = .02$ for step 1 ($F(1,95) = 2.11$, $p = .149$); $R^2 = .09$ for step 2 ($F(1,95) = 4.55$, $p = .013$)

Again, the first model was insignificant, but the second stage model was significant,

and when examining the coefficients, only workplace ethical culture significantly predicted

workplace harassment, as seen in *Table 6*.

Overall, neither the first hypothesis nor the mediational hypothesis was supported,

however the second and third hypotheses were both supported by the results. Therefore, the

more destructive a leader is, the worse the ethical culture of the workplace is. When

workplaces have a poor ethical culture, follower aggression is significantly higher, whereas if

there is a strong ethical culture, follower aggression is significantly lower. The implications of these results will be discussed below.

Discussion

The present study sought to understand why some employees exhibit aggressive or bullying behavior towards each other, and what factors may be related to this aggression. I examined how destructive leadership affects the environment of a workplace and the behavior of followers, with results providing novel insights into what antecedents are related to workplace bullying and how destructive leadership affects organizations as a whole. The two main findings were that destructive leadership significantly predicts the ethical culture of a workplace and that the workplace ethical culture significantly predicts workplace bullying, thus supporting the second and third hypotheses. This adds to the existing claims that destructive leadership, workplace culture, and employee behavior are significantly related (Padilla et al., 2007; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013) and supports the argument that a holistic approach should be considered when researching destructive leadership (Padilla et al., 2007). Not all hypotheses were supported, however, and interestingly, although destructive leadership predicted workplace culture and workplace culture predicted workplace bullying, no relationship was found between destructive leadership and workplace bullying. This finding was in contrast to what was expected based on evidence from other researchers (Mawritz et al., 2012; Schaubroeck et al., 2012). This suggests that there may be other factors that better explain how destructive leadership affects an organization. Nevertheless, the findings contribute an interesting perspective on the relationship that leaders may have to an organization's ethical culture, and how that culture in turn is related to how employees behave.

Destructive leadership and workplace bullying

    The prevalence of destructive leadership was not particularly high, with most participants reporting very low levels of various forms of destructive leadership in their workplace overall. Among those who did report some instances of destructive leadership, the most commonly rated behaviors are organized by the scale's authors under the "*passive, cowardly*" style and "*uncertain, unclear, messy*" style, otherwise known as Laissez-Faire leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007). These findings are in line with Aasland and colleagues' study (2010) that found that Laissez-Faire leadership is the most prevalent of all destructive leadership styles. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of destructive leadership as a whole, and as such the subscales of the measure were not tested. However, given the nonsignificant finding regarding the relationship between destructive leadership and workplace bullying, it is possible that the types of destructive leadership reported by participants as being prevalent in their workplace influenced the results. The Laissez-Faire style of leadership carries its own set of problems, such as psychological work fatigue (Barling & Frone, 2016), low motivation (Chaudhry & Javed, 2012), and increased sexual harassment (Lee, 2018). However, there is debate as to whether this style of leadership leads to bullying behavior among followers or not. Some researchers argue that passive forms of leadership are just as damaging as other forms of destructive leadership and that workplace bullying is a direct outcome (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007), while others argue that Laissez-Faire leadership is not even destructive enough to warrant the label "destructive leadership" (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). The present study has chosen the middle ground by utilizing a scale that includes all forms of destructive leadership within the measurement, to fully capture the broad range of behaviors a destructive leader may exhibit. It is possible, however, that the specific behaviors that participants reported occurring most

frequently do not have any direct relationship to workplace bullying, which would explain the lack of a significant finding here.

There is also evidence outlining the complex antecedents involved in workplace bullying. Some research has demonstrated evidence for a three-way model of bullying, of which leadership is only one facet (Elfi, Inge, Hans, & Nele, 2009) among others such as coping mechanisms, personality factors, and situational factors. It may be that destructive leadership simply is not a significant predictor of workplace bullying, due to the myriad of other factors involved in what leads a colleague to bully a coworker. A literature review on the antecedents of workplace bullying notes that it is the bullying target's opinion of destructive leaders that is most widely reported (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Given that the present study is examining destructive leadership from the perspective of a potential bully themselves, it may be that participants who engage in bullying behavior simply don't view their leaders as destructive, which would explain the non-significant finding for this hypothesis.

Destructive leadership, workplace ethical culture, and workplace bullying

The results supported the hypothesis that perceiving destructive leadership significantly predicts how employees perceive the ethical culture of their workplace. The analyses showed that the higher the scores for destructive leadership were, the lower the scores for ethical culture in the workplace. This is in line with what previous researchers have also found (Schaubroeck et al., 2012), and confirms that destructive leaders can have serious negative consequences for the climate of a workplace, which may explain how organizations become more widely affected by a single destructive leader.

The third hypothesis was also supported, demonstrating that workplace ethical culture significantly predicts workplace bullying, which is also in line with previous findings (Füsun Bulutlar & Ela Ünler Öz, 2009). The results showed that when the ethical culture of a

workplace is low, bullying in the workplace is higher. These findings contribute to the current literature by demonstrating a holistic example of how destructive leadership, workplace ethical culture, and workplace bullying may be linked.

Although no mediational relationship was found between the three variables, taken together, the two significant relationships between the variables provide insight firstly into how the effects of destructive leadership may be spread through workplace culture, and secondly into how workplace culture affects follower behavior. We know from Schaubroeck and colleagues' research (2012) that ethical leadership filters down through an organization by influencing not only the culture itself but has an indirect positive effect on the ethical behavior of followers as well. The present study drew from this and has demonstrated that conversely, destructive leadership is negatively related to the ethical culture of a workplace. The importance of this result is further enhanced by the related finding that a negative ethical workplace culture is positively related to workplace bullying.

When examining the behavior of employees working in toxic environments, researchers have often focused on the negative outcomes for the individual or their work performance (Anjum, Ming, Siddiqi, & Rasool, 2018), however, this research emphasizes the role that employees may have in perpetuating toxic workplace cultures. Given the level of focus already placed on leaders in the research, this finding suggests attention should be paid to followers for their role in perpetuating toxic behaviors in the workplace.

Limitations

This study sought to address a gap in research that explained how destructive leaders could negatively influence an organization through negatively affecting followers and workplace culture. The results partially explained some of the gaps in research, however, there were a few limitations to the study. Firstly, the data was cross-sectional. Many researchers have called for the need for longitudinal data to be collected in this area,

however, due to the sensitive nature of approaching organizations regarding the presence of destructive leaders and bullying, it is difficult to do. Therefore, no inferences can be made about the causal direction of the relationships examined.

Relatedly, a second possible limitation is that the data was collected entirely on social media. This data collection method allowed for a larger pool of participants to sample from, however there was little control over the validity of the information collected. While the anonymous nature of the online responses was useful given the potentially controversial responses regarding leaders and bullying behavior, it is possible there was a self-selection bias. Some participants may have been more likely to complete the survey if they had a particularly strong opinion on the subject or been more likely to respond to online questionnaires in general.

There is also the risk of a self-report bias, due to the disagreeable type of behavior participants were asked to self-disclose. The overall level of self-reported bullying behavior was relatively low, and these results may have been influenced by participants' reluctance to fully disclose their behavior.

Lastly, another limitation is the low Cronbach's alpha for one of the follower aggression scales (labelled workplace bullying). This was likely due to the low number of questions in the scale and as such the results using the scale are somewhat questionable. While this is a concern, the alternative follower aggression scale (labelled workplace harassment) yielded very similar results for all hypotheses, and as such the overall conclusions and support for the hypotheses may still be relied upon.

Avenues for future research

As mentioned earlier, the leadership field has a significant need for more longitudinal research. In the present study, destructive leadership was shown to be significantly related to the ethical culture of organizations. Future studies could include a longitudinal design

examining a destructive leader's effect on the culture of an organization over time. Similarly, the present study showed that the ethical culture of a workplace significantly predicts workplace bullying. A future study could examine the effects of an ethical working culture over time on the level of bullying among colleagues.

As mentioned previously, self-report bias may have been present in the data, and future research may want to incorporate another measure asking participants to rate the frequency of bullying behaviors that they witness towards others and towards themselves, to gain a more comprehensive picture.

Another possible direction for future research is in examining the subtypes of destructive leadership and its effects on culture and employees, as well as the subtypes of ethical culture and workplace bullying. It is possible that different types of destructive leadership lead to different outcomes in workplace culture. And it is also possible that different types of ethical culture have significant effects on the type or frequency of bullying among workers.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the relationship between destructive leadership, workplace ethical culture and workplace bullying to explore possible antecedents that lead employees to become aggressive towards each other. The results extend the current literature in the area by revealing that destructive leadership has a negative effect on the ethical culture of a workplace and confirming that workplace ethical culture is significantly related to employees bullying colleagues. This is the first study to examine the direct relationship between destructive leadership and the ethical culture of the workplace, and to attempt to link the two to workplace bullying. Although no significant mediational effect was found, the results demonstrate that all three of the domains are at least indirectly linked, providing further support for Padilla and colleagues' (2007) claim that destructive leadership needs to

be examined from multiple perspectives. In the wake of highly publicized scandals like the

Harvey Weinstein case that highlight how followers become toxic themselves in the presence

of destructive leaders, it is important to examine the mechanisms by which destructive

leadership affects an organization and, by extension, its followers. The present study has

highlighted one of these avenues by revealing workplace culture to be significantly related to

destructive leadership, and given culture's impact on follower behavior, these findings should

be taken seriously when considering how to deal with destructive leadership in a workplace.

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Appendix A

Introduction and informed consent from the online questionnaire.

Hello and welcome to this survey focusing on leadership and organizational culture.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. On the following pages, you will be asked

to answer questions about your experiences at work with your supervisor and with the culture

of your organization. The data collected will be part of my master's thesis in Psychology. The

purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the effects of leadership styles on the

work environment. All of your answers will be recorded anonymously. The survey takes

between 10-15 minutes to complete. Participation in the survey is voluntary and you can

withdraw at any time by closing the browser window. Thank you for your participation!

For any further enquiries about this study please contact me at sophie.mortensen-

cronin.1182@student.lu.se

Appendix B

Modified workplace harassment questionnaire.

Table 1

During the last 12 months at your workplace, how often have you been in a situation where you...

Item
Yelled or screamed at someone in your workplace?
Gossiped about and/or spread rumors about a coworker?
Made negative comments to a coworker about their intelligence, competence or productivity, or about another coworker?
Pressured a coworker to change their beliefs or opinions at work?
Made hostile or offensive gestures to a coworker?
Labeled someone in your workplace a "troublemaker" if they expressed a difference of opinion?
Humiliated or belittled someone in your workplace in front of others?
Took credit for a coworker's work or ideas?
Ignored a coworker or their work contributions?
Prevented a coworker from expressing themselves by interrupting them?
Swore at someone in your workplace?
Turned others in the work environment against a coworker?
Made negative comments to a coworker about their personality?
Talked down to someone in your workplace (e.g. treated them as a child or as inferior to you)?
Treated a coworker or evaluated them as though they were less good at their work than they really are?

Blamed a coworker personally for things that other people did, or that weren't their fault?

Expected less of a coworker than others in the same position?

Pushed or grabbed a coworker?

Offered a coworker a subtle or obvious bribe to do something they do not agree with?

Told a coworker insulting jokes?

Tried to control a coworker's nonwork related time or activities?

Left notes, signs, or other materials meant to embarrass a coworker?

Treated a coworker unfairly, compared to others in the same position (e.g. in terms of tasks

or assignments, salary, promotions, resources, reprimands)?

Made negative comments to a coworker about their appearance?

Threw something at a coworker?

Asked a coworker to do work that wasn't part of their job?

Excluded someone in your workplace from important work activities or meetings?

Threatened to "get back at" a coworker if they resisted doing something they thought was

wrong, or if they challenged things about the workplace?

Got physical with someone in the workplace?

Note: participants rated answers on a scale from *0 = never* to *2 = more than once*.