

Neuroticism as an antecedent of abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership in emergent leaders: The role of facets and agreeableness as a moderator

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Abstract

Academic interest in the relationship between leaders' personality and subordinates' perception of destructive leadership behavior is increasing. However, results so far have been weak, contradictory, and inconsistent to theory. Here, we examine if using facets of neuroticism, rather than the broader trait, can be more informative and increases the predictive power. Next, we explore the interplay between personality dimensions by examining if the relationship between the facet angry hostility in neuroticism and destructive leadership behavior is moderated by the trait agreeableness. Four hundred and twenty emergent leaders were examined in a military selection context, combining the leaders' self-rated neuroticism (T1) with subordinates' subsequent perception of abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership in a field exercise two weeks later (T2). The results indicated that using facets instead of the broad factor of neuroticism improved the prediction of examined outcomes. Only some of the facets of neuroticism were related to perceived leader behavior, with specific facets

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being identified for abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership, respectively. Further, the relationship between angry hostility and both leadership styles was moderated by agreeableness.

KEYWORDS

abusive supervision, agreeableness, laissez-faire leadership, neuroticism, personality traits

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen a rising academic interest in the relationship between leaders' personality traits and harmful leadership practices. Abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership represent two key leadership practices with negative consequences (Fischer et al., 2021; Fosse et al., 2019; Klasmeier et al., 2021). So far, studies of the relationship between personality traits and these leadership practices have given partly contradictory results or/and indicated weak relationships (e.g., Camps et al., 2016; Eissa & Lester, 2017). To advance the understanding of personality as antecedents of reported leader behavior, more profound and complex approaches have been recommended (e.g., Zaccaro, 2012).

Negative emotions are a key suspect in the search for leader-related antecedents to destructive leadership practices. Meta-analysis shows how the disposition to experience higher levels of negative emotions is associated with the expression of counterproductive workplace behavior (Yang & Diefendorff, 2009) and withdrawal behavior (Kiefer, 2005), and a lower score on neuroticism and negative emotions is associated with leader emergence and leader effectiveness (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002). The personality trait neuroticism describes the general tendency to experience negative affect. However, studies of the relationships between leader's neuroticism and abusive supervision or laissez-faire leadership give diverging results, with relationships ranging from strong to small or non-significant results (Camps et al., 2016; DeRue et al., 2011; Eissa & Lester, 2017). So far, data have predominantly been analyzed on the trait level. Yet, when discussing the results of the same analyses, authors commonly focus on specific facets. Tepper (2007) pointed to emotions such as anger and anxiety in neuroticism to explain the relationship between leaders' personality and abusive supervision. In the same way, anxiety has been pointed out as an important explanation when examining the relationship between personality and laissez-faire leadership (e.g., Spangler et al., 2008).

A possible explanation for the contradicting results is that different facets within a trait like neuroticism in some cases can have opposite effects; hence, a low score on one facet can be balanced by a high score on an opposing facet, resulting in a mean that does not reflect the true variation within the trait (Kant et al., 2013). In line with this, a growing body of research supports the hypothesis that narrower facets of personality may capture more unique aspects of a leaders' personality and increase the predictive power, compared with examining broader dimensions or traits (Dudley et al., 2006; Judge et al., 2013; Pletzer et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the association between leader personality and perceived destructive leadership behavior may also be a result of joint effects, where multiplicative combinations can reveal underlying patterns and explain unique variances in leadership styles above that of the individual trait (Zaccaro, 2012). Interestingly, Costa and McCrae (2008) state in their explanation of

different facets in neuroticism that even with a disposition to experience anger, its expression depends on the individual's level of agreeableness. In support of such an approach, Tepper (2007) suggested that leaders low on agreeableness are less concerned about how their behavior affects their subordinates; hence, they are more disposed to behave in an abusive manner. In addition, Blake et al. (2022) showed that agreeableness moderated and weakened the relationship between psychological power and abusive supervision (Foulek et al., 2018). Agreeableness as a trait describes a concern for others where facets are assumed to pull in the same direction in relation to a specific disposition as anger hostility. Accordingly, even if a leader has an urge to express his/her anger, the behavior could be moderated by a disposition towards agreeableness, being friendly, tenderminded, and cooperative.

The present study makes several contributions. First, it dissects the trait neuroticism to its facet level, to examine if using narrower facets can improve the prediction of abusive supervision and/or laissez-faire leadership, compared with the overarching broader trait. Moreover, in line with personality theory and the importance of examining multiple combinations of attributes (Zaccaro, 2012), we test the interaction between angry hostility and agreeableness in relation to destructive leadership practices. Third, by contrasting leaders that show a sustained display of active nonphysical hostility towards subordinates (Tepper, 2000) with leaders who avoid and neglect to perform their duties when their followers are in need of leadership (e.g., Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008), we display how the facets can play a different role depending on active or passive-avoidant destructive and poor leadership practices. Finally, we have examined both leaders self-reported personality traits and subordinated-rated leadership practices in a two-wave design, to improve the robustness of analysis compared with other studies that so far primarily have relied on cross-sectional designs (e.g., Tahira et al., 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Neuroticism and the potential explanatory power of facets

The dominant theoretical framework for personality is the Five-Factor Model (Judge et al., 2013), consisting of five traits: openness for experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Of these, neuroticism describes the general tendency to experience negative affect, such as anxiety, depression, guilt, and shyness and anger, hostility, frustration, and bitterness (McCrae & Costa, 2010). According to Affective Events Theory, work events and emotions can lead to behaviors that are perceived by subordinates as negative (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). When a leader experiences unpleasant feelings in a work setting (e.g., bitterness or frustration due to lack of resources, conflicts, or harassment by their own superior), it can give rise to abusive or passive avoidant behavior towards subordinates, allowing the leader to vent, express (Robinson & Bennett, 1997), or suppress these negative feelings.

Empirical studies have systematically shown how negative feelings are related to aggressive and deviant work behaviors (Hershcovis et al., 2007; Spector et al., 2007). However, studies between leaders' neuroticism and subordinates' perception of abusive supervision suggest a strong (Breevaart & de Vries, 2017; Eissa & Lester, 2017; Xu et al., 2010) or even no relationship (Camps et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2020; Tahira et al., 2019). Meta-analyses of the association between neuroticism and laissez-faire leadership or passive-avoidant leadership indicate a rather weak positive relationship ($r = .04$ and $r = .05$, respectively) (Bono & Judge, 2004;

DeRue et al., 2011). More detailed knowledge of facets related to perceived poor leaders' behavior can be useful to understand such divergent and weak results.

Facets of neuroticism and abusive supervision

Neuroticism is represented by six specific scales that measures facets of the domain, namely anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and vulnerability. Tepper (2007) suggested that both anxiety and angry hostility have the potential to evoke emotions that can lead to acts perceived by their subordinates as abusive supervision, like telling subordinates that their thoughts or feelings are stupid or belittling subordinates in front of others (Tepper, 2000). In a field- and experimental study, Schyns et al. (2018) showed how subordinates perception mediate the relationship between abusive leader behavior and reactions, illustrating a path from behavior to reaction and how perception reported in survey research is a valid proxy for actual behavior. With a high score on angry hostility, leaders are more likely to experience frustration, anger, and bitterness, and we assume that this anger can be ventilated or expressed in behavior towards subordinates in job contexts. Anxiety describes individuals with a disposition to be apprehensive, tense, and jittery (Costa & McCrae, 2008), and it is less intuitive how this would affect the relationship to abusive supervision. When experiencing such feelings, leaders may react and behave negatively towards subordinates. On the other hand, anxiety encompasses feelings of reduced energy and a intro-perspective focus, leading to withdrawal, non-behavior, or avoidant behavior. Accordingly, the empirical findings seem ambiguous. Mawritz et al. (2014) showed how the experience of meeting exceedingly difficult goals and hindrance stress at work was positively related to both anger and anxiety, which, in turn, predicted abusive supervision. On the other hand, Kant et al. (2013) found that leaders' trait anger was a predictor of petty tyranny and explained that this sensation routes via affect, cognition, and arousal and results in both impulsive and thoughtful action towards subordinates. Anxiety, however, was not related to petty tyranny in this study.

On the basis of the current knowledge, we hypothesize that angry hostility, but not anxiety, is related to abusive supervision as perceived and reported by subordinates. For the other four facets in neuroticism, we do not expect a relationship with abusive supervision. Feelings of sadness and hopelessness (depression), or of shyness or inferiority (self-consciousness), are not expected to be expressed in a such negative leader behavior. Similarly, the inability to control cravings and urges for food and cigarettes, and so on, (impulsiveness—which is not the same as spontaneity or risk-taking) or being dependent and hopeless when facing emergency situations (vulnerability) are also not very likely to be expressed as abusive supervision. In line with this, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Leaders' self-rated facet of (b) n2—angry hostility is positively related to subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision.

Facets of neuroticism and laissez-faire leadership

A negative emotional response can be ventilated as an open and direct aggressive behavior. Yet, it can also be associated with avoidance and withdrawal behavior that can be perceived as laissez-faire leadership behavior by subordinates. Laissez-faire leadership can be described as a

nonresponsive and avoidant type of leadership behavior in situations where active leader involvement is required (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008). When feeling anxious, leaders can ventilate their emotions by avoiding the difficult situation and their subordinates, even when there is a clear need for active leader involvement. In the same way, leaders' feelings of sadness, hopelessness, shyness, or inferiority (defining the facets of depression and self-consciousness) may lead to defensive and passive strategies in order to cope with situations (Bajcar & Babiak, 2020; Niemann et al., 2014). On the other hand, when feeling angry, bitter, or frustrated (like in angry hostility), leaders can be assumed to actively express their emotions and less likely be perceived as avoidant or passive by their subordinates. Finally, we do not assume that impulsiveness, the facet that describes an inability to control cravings and urges (e.g., for chocolate or possessions), will be expressed by avoidant and passive leader behavior. Based on the above, we suggest the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2. Leaders self-rated facets of (a) n1—anxiety, (c) n3—depression, (d) n4—self-consciousness, and (e) n6—vulnerability are positively related to subordinates' perceptions of laissez-faire leadership and negatively related to (b) n2—angry hostility.

Better prediction potential with narrower facets than broader traits?

Another question is whether we by including facets can increase the predictive power compared to employing measures of the broader and overarching dimensions of personality, in our case neuroticism. This is part of the bandwidth-fidelity dilemma, looking at whether lower-order traits are better suited to predict specific outcomes than are higher-order traits (e.g., Ashton, 1998; Judge et al., 2013; Ones & Wiswesvaran, 1996). Some argue that broad and heterogeneous personality measures are better suited to capturing relevant phenomena that often share a broad and multi-dimensional aspect, such as job performance (Ones & Wiswesvaran, 1996). Others propose that narrower traits capture more unique aspects of personality and therefore can be more specific to the phenomenon at hand (Bergner et al., 2010) and hence improve the prediction of leadership behavior. As pinpointed by Kant et al. (2013), a challenge with traits is that “Broader personality dimensions, such as neuroticism—including both trait anxiety and trait anger—may instead turn the opposite effects of anger and anxiety into a meaningless mean and be interpreted as non-significant results” (p. 119). Hence, we suggest that broad traits may mask important associations between specific facets and harmful leader behaviors, leading to weak or ambiguous results. This is particularly relevant when the overall broader trait score is within the average range.

Several meta-studies support that a facet-level perspective adds incremental validity to prediction of leader behavior and outcomes. A meta-study of the relative merits of broad and narrow traits of the Big Five showed that moving from the broader to the narrower traits significantly improved the prediction of job performance (Judge et al., 2013). Similar results were found in a meta-analysis of facets of conscientiousness in the prediction of job performance (Dudley et al., 2006). Concluding a meta-analysis of extraversion, Wilmot et al. (2019) pinpointed that the predictive potential of a construct may be underrealized when not taking account of facets predicting in opposite directions.

To this end, we assume that using the six facets of neuroticism, rather than the broader factor, will give higher resolution and add more relative predictive power to our analysis. By

testing the prediction of two different forms of leadership, namely, abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership, we will test the robustness of these hypotheses and illuminate the different patterns that can lead to increased prediction for two distinct, yet often overlapping, forms of poor leadership practices. In summary, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypotheses 3. Leaders' self-reported facets of neuroticism will improve the prediction of subordinates reported (a) abusive supervision (b) and laissez-faire leadership as compared with the broader neuroticism factor.

Agreeableness as a moderator of the relationship between angry hostility and perceptions of abusive supervision

Leader's experience of negative emotions such as anger can be ventilated in active behavior, like abusive supervision. However, even if a leader has a high score on angry hostility, other personality dispositions can also influence how a given leader will react and behave in a given situation. Individuals scoring high on *agreeableness* are more likely to be generous, humble, cooperative, and kind (Costa & McCrae, 2008). The disposition to be gentle could buffer a negative behavioral response. Hence, agreeableness may influence the actual expression of anger. First, agreeableness disposes to behavior perceived as nice by others. Studies show that kindness in a leader role is positively related to leadership emergence (Blake et al., 2022) and negatively correlated with counterproductive and deviant behaviors (Berry et al., 2007). In line with this, studies of the relationship between agreeableness and abusive supervision indicate a significant negative relationship (Breevaart & de Vries, 2017; Eissa & Lester, 2017; Wu, 2020), although some studies do not identify any such significant relationship (Camps et al., 2016; Tahira et al., 2019). Second, individuals high in agreeableness are found to be better in controlling negative emotions, like anger (Tobin et al., 2000; Yang & Diefendorff, 2009), reducing the negative behavioral response to these negative emotions. Finally, studies show that agreeableness can influence other relationships as a moderator, for example, weakening the effect between psychological power and abusive supervision (Foulek et al., 2018). Interestingly, the professional manual for NEO Big five states that the facet angry hostility "measures the individuals readiness to experience anger; whether the anger is expressed depends on the individuals level of Agreeableness" (Costa & McCrae, 2008, p. 21). In line with this, we suggest that trait agreeableness moderates the effect of angry hostility on abusive supervision and propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. The hypothesized positive relationship between the facet angry hostility (n2) and abusive supervision is moderated by agreeableness. This relationship is stronger (weaker) for individuals low (high) in agreeableness.

Agreeableness as a moderator in the relationship between angry hostility and perception of laissez-faire leadership

Leaders with higher levels of angry hostility are expected to be perceived as displaying less laissez-faire leader behavior; however, this could also be affected by other personality dispositions. Studies show that individuals with a high score on agreeableness tend to be more

concerned with other employees' growth and development needs and are likely to be available to subordinates when needed (Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge et al., 2009; McCrae & Costa, 2010). Their expression of concern, willingness to help, and availability are relevant to the perception of laissez-faire leadership behavior by reducing the perception of a leader that is not making decisions, abdicate responsibility, and refrain from providing leadership and guidance. Empirically, meta-analyses show a significant but weak negative relationship between agreeableness and passive-avoidant leadership forms, such as laissez-faire leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004; DeRue et al., 2011).

In line with this, we suggest that agreeableness, in the same way as for abusive supervision, can influence whether the leader's experience of negative emotions is expressed and perceived as avoidant leader behavior. A leader that is high in angry hostility is generally prone to experience and express negative emotions like anger, and this can result in subordinates generally perceiving the leader to be low in laissez-faire leadership behavior. The reason is that the leader's temper, although not always pleasant, will make employees perceive the leader as involved, as opposed to indifferent and avoiding. Moreover, if this leader is also particularly high in agreeableness, the effect could be strengthened (that is, perceived as even less laissez-faire), because high levels of agreeableness would dispose to choosing more constructive ways to express the strong feelings, retaining the expression of the strong emotion, but in a manner more considerate towards employees. Conversely, when a leader high in angry hostility also happens to be very low on agreeableness, the leader will not be concerned with how they are perceived by their subordinates and displays of anger will not be perceived as a form of leader involvement but just anger. Based on the above reasoning, our final hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 5. The hypothesized negative relationship between the facet angry hostility (n_2) and laissez-faire leadership is moderated by agreeableness. This relationship is stronger (weaker) for individuals high (low) in agreeableness.

METHODS

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from applicants to the Officer Candidate School in the "Norwegian" Armed Forces during the summer of 2017. The personality test NEO-PI-R was distributed and completed in a plenary setting at the military base during the first assessment week of the selection process for the officer candidate school. A civilian member of the research team was on site to administer the questionnaire and to answer questions. The second week consisted of a field exercise conducted outside the base. The candidates were given different tasks to complete during this period, divided in teams of seven to ten members. Over the course of several days, the candidates took turns in leading their team and carrying out different missions and tasks. The tasks were designed to test the candidates' ability to lead and make their group perform under difficult circumstances, including possible threats from hostile forces, challenging terrain, and lack of food and sleep. The candidates remained in the field for 6 days, where they were monitored by an experienced officer or non-commissioned officer (NCO). In sum, the duration of the leadership task was approximately half a day. After the field exercise, candidates were invited to complete a second research questionnaire, in which they rated every other fellow candidate in the same team on their leadership performance. All candidates had a unique number

in large print on their vest that they used throughout the exercise. This number was used to identify who they were rating on the questionnaire. These second questionnaires were completed anonymously, so that only the candidate being rated was identifiable in the data set, not the identity of the candidates doing the rating.

Information about the purpose of the study was provided both orally and in writing. Respondents were informed that the study was approved by “Norwegian” Social Science Data Services, and they were assured that the collected data would be treated with strict confidentiality and that the results would be used for research purposes only. The current study was part of a research project examining the validity of instruments used in the selection process by the “Norwegian” Armed Forces, where “Person-Organization fit also was examined in 2017 (Sørli et al., 2020)”.

Our sample consisted of 76% men and 24% women in the first week (T1, $N = 1039$), with a response rate of 93%, and in the second week (T2, $N = 429$), 79% men and 21% women, with a response rate of 76%. They were matched using a given id number for the selection period. Only a small fraction of the applicants had completed basic 1-year military service for conscripts. The design of the study is outlined in Table 1.

Measures

Abusive supervision

Subordinate ratings of abusive supervision were measured by five items (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000), where responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). For each candidate, we used the average of the ratings by all other team members. The scale showed a high level of reliability ($\alpha = .92$, $\omega = 94$ [.92–.95]). Example items are “my leader tells me that my thoughts and feelings are stupid” and “my leader puts me down in front of others.”

Laissez-faire leadership

Subordinate ratings of laissez-faire leadership were measured by four items from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008). As with

TABLE 1 Research design for the study

Respondent	Independent variables Week 1 (T1)	Dependent variables Week 2 (T2)
Leader	Neuroticism Extraversion Openness to experience Agreeableness Conscientiousness	
Subordinate		Abusive supervision Laissez-faire leadership

Note: $N(T1) = 1039$, $N(T2) = 429$.

abusive supervision, all team members rated every other team member, pertaining to their performance when holding a leadership role, and the average of these scores was used. Respondents were asked to judge how frequently each statement fits the observed behaviors of the given candidate when in this role, ranging from *not at all* (0), *once in a while* (1), *sometimes* (2), *fairly often* (3) to *frequently, if not always* (4). Example of an item: “The person I am rating avoid getting involved when important issues arise.” The items were averaged to yield an overall score ($\alpha = .92$, $\omega = .93$ [.92–.94]).

NEO-PI-R

The NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) is a 240-item inventory, which assesses the FFM Domains of Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness to experience (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C), with 6 Facets (8 items each) under the 5 Domains. Its psychometric properties and validity have been well-documented cross-culturally (McCrae et al., 2005) and also in the “Norwegian” context (“Martinsen et al., 2011”). Each statement was answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Some items were negatively worded and were reversed before the score was computed. Sample items include the following: “Sometimes I feel completely worthless” (neuroticism), and “When I make a commitment, I can always be counted on to follow through” (agreeableness). Cronbach’s alpha, as well as coefficient omega including 95% confidence intervals, was calculated with the following results: neuroticism ($\alpha = .90$, $\omega = .91$ [.90, .92]), agreeableness ($\alpha = .86$, $\omega = .86$ [.85, .88]), and facets for neuroticism: n1—anxiety ($\alpha = .76$, $\omega = .76$ [.74, .79]), n2—angry hostility ($\alpha = .74$, $\omega = .74$ [.71, .77]), n3—depression ($\alpha = .67$, $\omega = .67$ [.64, .71]), n4—self-consciousness ($\alpha = .65$, $\omega = .66$ [.62, .69]), n5—impulsiveness ($\alpha = .64$, $\omega = .65$ [.61, .68]), and n6—vulnerability ($\alpha = .74$, $\omega = .73$ [.70, .76]).

Analysis strategy

Data were analyzed in R (R Core Team, 2019) to increase reproducibility and transparency. Following recommendations concerning reliability estimates (e.g., Morera & Stokes, 2016; Sijtsma, 2009), we calculated coefficient omega reliability estimates, including 95% confidence intervals, using the R package *MBESS* (Kelley, 2007). In addition, we calculated Cronbach’s alpha to enable comparison with other studies reporting this index. All relationships of main interest were between leaders’ self-rated traits and subordinates’ ratings of leaders’ behaviors, that is, on the person-level. However, as the candidates were nested within teams, observations were not independent. To account for this, we used the R package *psych* (Revelle, 2021) to estimate the proportion of variation attributable to the group (team) level. For abusive supervision, ICC1 was 0.172, 95% CI [0.086, 0.288], and for laissez-faire leadership, ICC1 was 0.115, 95% CI [0.038, 0.221]. We then used the *MBESS* package to calculate level 1 (i.e., within-group) correlations. Subsequently, the *lme4* package (Bates et al., 2015) was used to perform multilevel regressions to test all our hypotheses. In these, we included random intercepts in addition to our independent variables, for each of our two outcomes of interest. To visualize interaction effects and calculate Johnson–Neymann intervals, the *interactions* package (Long, 2019) was applied. In line with Judge and Bono (2000), we compared the facets with factor level prediction of leadership style by performing several regression analyses; see Table 3. For each of the Big Five

traits, we first entered the overall unit-weighted factor in a regression equation to predict leader style and then the six facets as a set in a separate regression equation.

RESULTS

Descriptives and analyses

Means, standard deviations, and within- and between level correlations between the study variables are presented in Table 2.

In Hypothesis 1, we proposed that leaders' self-rated score on (b) angry hostility is positively related to subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision. As shown in Table 2, the facet angry hostility was positively related to abusive supervision ($r = .19, p < .001$). Hence, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

For laissez-faire leadership, Hypothesis 2 suggested that leaders self-rated scores on the facets (a) anxiety, (c) depression, (d) self-consciousness, and (e) vulnerability were all positively related to subordinates' perceptions of laissez-faire leadership, whereas (b) angry hostility was negatively related. As shown in Table 2, hypotheses b and d were supported as we found significant bivariate relationships between laissez-faire leadership and (b) angry hostility ($r = -.17, p < .01$) and (d) self-consciousness ($r = .10, p < .05$), respectively, and in the expected direction. However, Hypotheses 2a, c, and e, regarding anxiety, depression, and vulnerability, were not supported.

Hypothesis 3 suggests that using the facets of neuroticism will predict both (a) abusive supervision and (b) laissez-faire leadership better than the main overarching trait. To test the predictive power of the six facets of neuroticism versus the overall dimension (all the six facets in neuroticism added together), we conducted several regression analyses, in line with Judge and Bono (2000). First, we entered the six facets as a set to predict subordinates rating of abusive supervision and then laissez-faire leadership. Second, in a separate regression, we entered the overall dimension (neuroticism) to predict the two forms of leadership, respectively. The results are presented in Table 3. For abusive supervision, the results show that angry hostility was the only significant facet ($\beta = .08, p < .001$), whereas the overall construct neuroticism was not significant. For laissez-faire leadership, anxiety ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$), angry hostility ($\beta = -.14, p < .001$), self-consciousness ($\beta = .15, p < .001$), and vulnerability ($\beta = .09, p < .05$) were significant, whereas the overall trait was not. Taken together, the results indicate that facets were better at predicting the two leadership styles than were the overarching broad trait.

Finally, in Hypotheses 4 and 5, we suggested that the positive relationships between the facet angry hostility (n2) and both (a) abusive supervision and (b) laissez-faire leadership were moderated by agreeableness. To test these hypotheses, we performed multilevel regression analyses with random intercepts, where we added angry hostility \times agreeableness as an interaction term. As shown in the interaction models of Table 4, both hypotheses were supported as we found a significant interaction between angry hostility and agreeableness in prediction of both abusive supervision ($\beta = -.04, p > .05$) and laissez-faire leadership ($\beta = -.09, p > .05$).

To visualize the interaction pattern, we plotted the slope of the main predictor at ± 1 SD of the moderator, for both abusive supervision (Figure 1) and laissez-faire leadership (Figure 2). To examine under which conditional values of the moderator the slope of the main predictor were significantly different from zero, we used the Johnson–Neyman technique (Preacher et al., 2006). For abusive supervision as an outcome, the slope of angry hostility was

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations between the study variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. n1—anxiety	2.43	0.61	-									
2. n2—angry hostility	2.08	0.54	.42***	-								
3. n3—depression	2.44	0.55	.65***	.48***	-							
4. n4—self-consciousness	2.21	0.52	.58***	.45***	.60***	-						
5. n5—impulsiveness	2.81	0.54	.42***	.46***	.42***	.38***	-					
6. n6—vulnerability	1.89	0.44	.62***	.45***	.57***	.54***	.46***	-				
7. Neuroticism	2.31	0.40	.82***	.71***	.82***	.77***	.68***	.78***	-			
8. Agreeableness	3.62	.34	-.12**	-.52***	-.22***	-.22***	-.28***	-.19***	-.32***	-		
9. Abusive supervision	1.25	0.34	-.03	.19***	.05	-.03	.07	.00	.05	-.26***	-	
10. Laissez-faire leadership	1.84	0.59	-.04	-.17**	.02	.10*	-.08	.05	-.03	.17**	-.23***	-

Note: *N*—personality = 1039; *N*—leadership = 429.
*d*_s < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001 (two-tailed).

TABLE 3 Big Five factor neuroticism versus facets of neuroticism in predicting abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership.

	Leader style			
	Abusive supervision		Laissez-faire leadership	
	β	β	β	β
Neuroticism	.02		-.0004	
n1—anxiety		-.03		-.10*
n2—angry hostility		.08***		-.14***
n3—depression		.02		.05
n4—self-consciousness		-.02		.15***
n5—impulsiveness		.02		-.06
n6—vulnerability		-.03		.09*
Log Likelihood	-128.69	-134.03	-319.26	-313.16
Akaike Inf. Crit.	265.38	286.06	646.53	644.32
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	280.90	320.99	662.05	679.24
R ² (marginal)	.00	.05	.00	.09

Note: $N = 380$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

significantly different from zero when agreeableness was outside the interval $[-1.12$ to $10.48]$. The range of observed values for agreeableness was $[-3.53$ to $2.22]$. This means that with decreasing levels of agreeableness, down from -1.12 , the association between angry hostility and abusive supervision is strengthened.

For laissez-faire leadership as an outcome, the slope of angry hostility was significant ($p < 0.5$) when agreeableness was outside the interval $[-2.70$ to $0.02]$. Hence, for leaders with higher scores on agreeableness than this interval, the negative relationship between angry hostility and perceived laissez-faire leadership is strengthened (that is, perceived as even less laissez-faire leadership).

DISCUSSION

The aims of the present study were to examine if narrower facets of neuroticism can be more informative than the broader trait when looking at the relationship between personality and abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership, respectively. Furthermore, we tested if agreeableness moderates the effect of angry hostility on these two leadership styles.

The analyses showed significant associations between several of the personality facets of neuroticism and the two leadership practices, whereas no significant associations were identified with the broader neuroticism trait (see Table 3). These findings support the assumption that broad traits may mask important associations between specific facets and leader behavior (e.g., Kant et al., 2013) and that facets can predict outcomes better than can the overarching trait. Different or even opposite relationships between facets and leadership practices may be obscured when considering the broader trait. Hence, associations between the overarching trait

TABLE 4 Moderator analysis—Angry hostility, agreeableness, and leader style.

	Leader style		Laissez-faire leadership	
	Abusive supervision		Interaction	
	Main effects	Interaction	Main effects	Interaction
[Intercept]	1.26*** (1.21, 1.31)	1.24*** (1.19, 1.29)	1.83*** (1.76, 1.91)	1.79*** (1.71, 1.87)
Angry hostility	.02 (-.02, .06)	.01 (-.03, .05)	-.06 (-.13, .01)	-.07 (-.14, .001)
Agreeableness	-.09*** (-.13, -.04)	-.08*** (-.13, -.04)	.04 (-.04, .12)	.05 (-.03, .12)
Angry hostility × Agreeableness		-.04* (-.07, -.002)		-.09** (-.15, -.03)
Log Likelihood	-119.10	-120.12	-317.82	-316.10
Akaike Inf. Crit.	248.20	252.23	645.65	644.21
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	267.60	275.51	665.05	667.49
R ²	.06	.07	.02	.04

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. R² (marginal) N = 358.

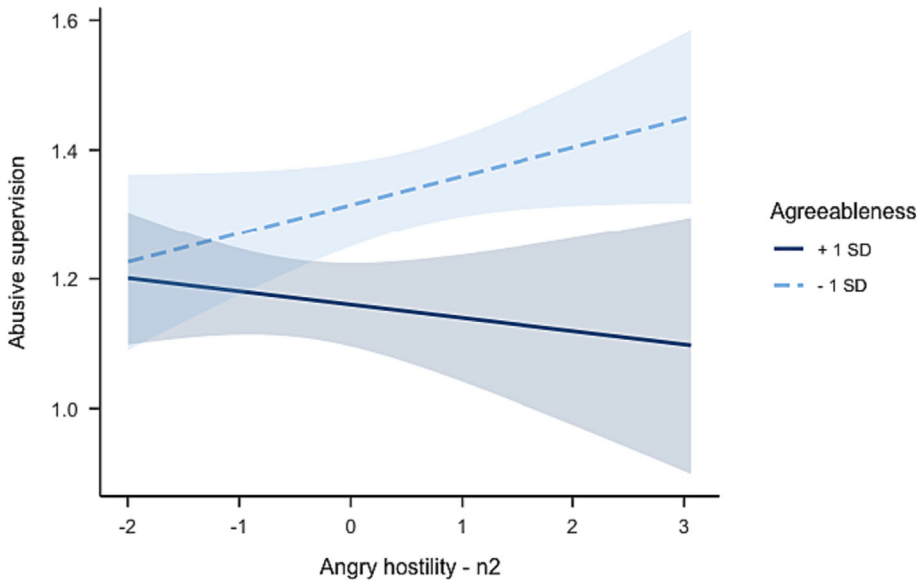


FIGURE 1 Interaction of angry hostility and agreeableness on abusive supervision.

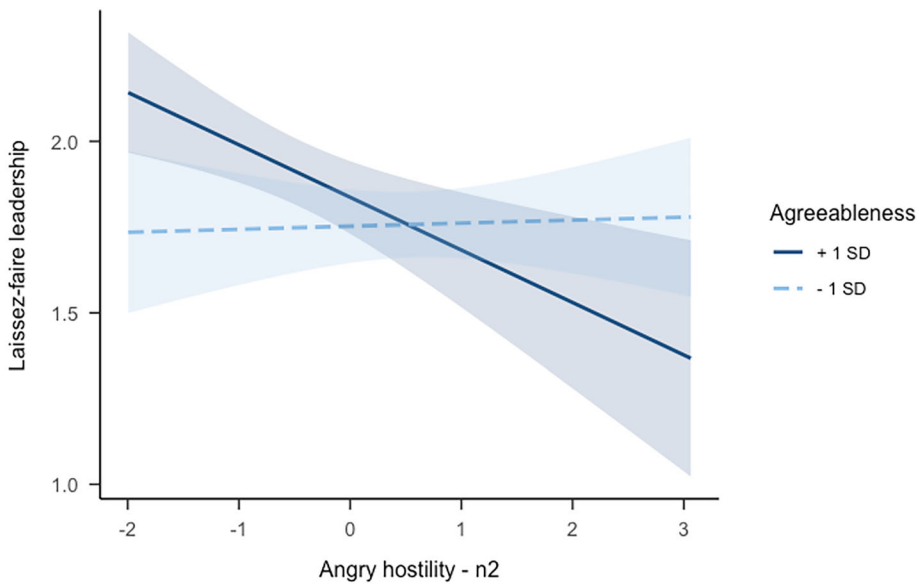


FIGURE 2 Interaction of angry hostility and agreeableness on laissez-faire leadership.

and the two leadership styles can be weaker or even non-significant. The results also showed that different facets are related to the two examined leader styles, even if factor level is non-significant, underlining how facets can increase the predictive power. This knowledge is important both to advance the theoretical understanding of processes responsible for the relation between personality and negative forms of leadership and for illustrating the difference between passive and active leadership forms.

In line with our hypothesis, the association between leader personality and forms of destructive leadership may depend on more than one trait, being the result of joint and interactive effects between different personality dispositions, here angry hostility and agreeableness. Angry hostility can be described as a specific facet that predict specific behavior, and the broader agreeableness encompasses facets that describes concern for others and moderates angry hostility. We further show how these combinations are only significant as a moderator on higher or lower levels of agreeableness. This illustrates the importance of considering several dispositions together as they can influence each other and explain unique variances in leadership practices, in our case poor and destructive forms of leadership practices.

However, despite increased explained variance by using facets of personality and combination of dispositions, the results yielded relatively small effect sizes. While psychology tends to see human behavior as a function of both person and situation, measures of traits have been criticized for having low predictive validity when it comes to complex social behavior (Bandura, 1999; Barrick et al., 2001). In our study, the result of bivariate correlations ranges from .19 to $-.26$. Meta-analysis examining associations of personality, laissez-faire leadership, or passive leadership indicates a range from .04 to .12 (Bono & Judge, 2004; DeRue et al., 2011), whereas meta-analysis of follower's personality factors to abusive supervision indicates a range from .03 to .15 (Mackey et al., 2017; Mackey et al., 2020). Weak relationships have been explained by a failure to take into account the concept of situation strength, defined as the situational constraints present in the environment (Judge & Zapata, 2015), and the idea of trait activation, defined as a "process by which individuals express their traits when presented with trait-relevant situational cues" (Tett & Burnett, 2003, p. 502). In their meta-analysis of traits and work performance, Judge and Zapata (2015) found that the job context related to situation strength and trait activation contributed significantly to explaining variations in the role of personality as a predictor of behavior. All Big Five traits explained more of the variation in the outcomes in weak situations where the job was unstructured and where it was possible for employees to make decisions and act on their own discretion. In contrast, when rules, structures, and cues provided clear and directive guidance, the situation can be described as strong, and the predictive validity of the traits was reduced (Judge & Zapata, 2015).

In our study, leader behavior was observed in a field exercise under continuous observation by a senior officer. The exercise was part of a selection process, with participants competing with their peers for selection. The tasks and structure were predetermined, and the situational influence can hence be described as rather strong. Accordingly, dispositions to act in ways that can be perceived as negative, or passive-avoidant, may be somewhat constrained. An interesting finding was that our study yielded stronger results for laissez-faire leadership. This could be related to the fact that active negative behavior is more socially unaccepted than avoidant and passive behavior. In addition, the situation may activate specific advantageous or disadvantageous traits or facets, such as positive emotions in agreeableness, and likewise prevent the activation of disadvantageous facets, such as angry hostility in neuroticism. Another reason for weak results can be linked to the use of single-source ratings of personality. The predictive validity of personality has been found to increase substantially across all of the Big Five personality traits through the use of 360° performance ratings (Oh & Berry, 2009). This is in line with the findings of Oh et al. (2011), showing that the validity of five factor model traits in predicting overall performance is higher when observers' ratings of five factor model traits are included, not just leaders' self-reports. de Vries (2012) proposes that relatively weak relationships between personality and leadership styles are related to relatively low levels of self-other agreement. Another possibility is that the nature of the relationship is best described by curvilinear models

that can reveal more of these associations, where too much or too little of a trait may result in negative leadership behavior (Pierce & Aguinis, 2011), which is then moderated by other attributes (Kaiser et al., 2015). Conversely, others again report minimal evidence of curvilinearity for normal range personality and performance (Walmsley et al., 2018). Another argument is the danger of demanding large effect as “it overlooks the small effects that are most likely to be real, hindering attempts to identify and understand the actual determinants of complex psychological phenomena” (Götz et al., 2022, p. 2). However, the value of small effects is still under debate (e.g., Primbs et al., 2022). Hence, further investigations that address these aspects are needed.

Strengths and limitations

Empirical findings must always be interpreted in the context of the limitations and strengths of the given study. First, a limitation is that the data were collected in a military selection context where the participants probably experienced strong competition and, hence, were under pressure to perform well, as the results of the task completion may have decisive consequences for their future career. This could influence responses in the self-evaluation of participants' personality traits, with corresponding adjusted behaviors (i.e., a strong situation) and increasing susceptibility to social desirability (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In order to reduce such undesirable biases, respondents were clearly informed that the data would only be used for research purposes. In addition, scoring tables for the Big Five are available for both regular and selection contexts, where scores from selection contexts are more favorable (McCrae & Costa, 2017). By this, knowledge from a selection context is highly relevant to practical recruitment. Potential differences between these two contexts may also be interesting from a theoretical point of view. In general, candidates score themselves higher in a selection context, but this could be different for active and passive forms of poor leadership.

Second, relatively low reports of abusive supervision and laissez-faire behavior were reported in our sample. Especially, abusive supervision is challenging to study as a low base rate phenomenon, and we did not have the possibility to do an experiment to compensate for this, because we collected data from a real military selection context. We emphasize that the relatively low occurrence of poor leadership will influence the results and generalizability of our findings. Fischer et al. (2021) suggest performing experimental ethical manipulations that actively create variation in levels of abusive supervision, to examine if results from real context can be replicated.

Third, to compare and evaluate the reproducibility of the multilevel models, several methods are available. The results for Log Likelihood, AIC, and BIC are presented and had quite similar values for the models tested. In an additional attempt to display the model differences, we used marginal *R*-squared, as proposed in the new recommendation for practice (e.g., Rights & Sterba, 2020). However, this use of effect sizes like *R*-squared is debated and can result in more unstable models. Fourth, as most candidates were young males preselected on motivation to serve in a military organization and general mental ability at average or above (5 or more on standard nine scale), the generalizability to a more balanced population is limited but warrants further analysis in other contexts.

Despite these limitations, our study is the first to simultaneously examine both abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership in relation to facets. We found that the differences between the two types of leadership styles were reflected in their different relationships with

specific facets, both in strength and direction. For example, abusive supervision was positively related to the facet angry hostility, whereas angry hostility was negatively related to laissez-faire leadership. This is important, as narrower traits can reveal relationships between specific facets and harmful leader behavior that are not seen when focusing on the overarching trait or when looking at less specific measures of poor leadership. Further, the data on personality traits and leadership are not just collected at different points in time (approximately 14 days apart) but, more importantly, originate from different sources, combining self-reports of personality and subordinate reports of perceived leadership behavior. This reduces the common data source variance often seen in such studies and therefore strengthens the validity of the results.

Suggestions for future research

Literature on the relationship between leaders' personality traits and the two forms of destructive leadership, abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership, is sparse and has yielded diverging empirical results. Future studies might profit from extending our findings in several ways: first, by using more rigorous methods, such as an experimental research design with several data sources and the use of objective outcome data, preferably in combination (e.g., Fischer et al., 2021).

Second, by examining different aspects of personality and destructive forms of leadership, we suggest that different instruments for personality should be tested in the same study. The use of HEXACO has showed promising results in predicting workplace deviance (Pletzer et al., 2019). In this regard, it should be noted that the content of Big Five neuroticism and agreeableness is different and partly rotated compared with HEXACO Emotionality and Agreeableness. As illustrated by Pletzer et al. (2019), the anger facet that is included in Big Five neuroticism is part of agreeableness in the HEXACO model. Breevaart and de Vries (2017) also showed the importance of Honesty–Humility factor in HEXACO as a predictor of abusive supervision.

In addition, instruments capturing the dark triad are promising, with a medium to strong association being found with both abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership (e.g., Lyons et al., 2019; Mathieu & Babiak, 2015; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016), and added incremental predictive validity for workplace deviance beyond the Big Five (Ellen et al., 2021). Most studies of the dark side of leadership and its relationship to personality traits have a singular focus on abusive supervision. Abusive supervision captures some specific behaviors that may arise in the relationship between a leader and follower, but the measure employed has been criticized with respect to conceptualization and dimensionality (Fischer et al., 2021). Third, although studies show that traits are relatively stable (Roberts et al., 2006; Roberts & DeVecchio, 2000), the effect of a trait can also be influenced by situational strength and trait activation (Judge & Zapata, 2015). We recommend future research to take into account the person–situation interaction and examine how situation strength and trait activation may come to play related to the different facets.

Finally, because the results from previous studies appear to be ambiguous and divergent, especially with respect to the relationships between leader's personality traits and abusive supervision, we propose synthesizing the growing body of primary studies in a systematic review and/or a meta-analysis for further theoretical development. Such work could direct future investigations by identifying regularities across multiple studies, rule out error in single studies, provide information on promising moderators, and develop propositions to be tested (e.g., Daniels, 2018).

Practical implications

Knowledge of the relationships between a leader's personality traits and harmful leadership behaviors is important in recruitment processes and development programs for leaders. In general, meta-analyses show that personality traits are associated with leadership performance (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002). The present study substantiates these findings by pinpointing the need to consider using facets and to assess personality as combinations of different dimensions as antecedents of behavior. However, the associations are weak. Hence, to prevent destructive leadership as an unwanted psychosocial risks at work, it is important to use different strategies focusing both on primary prevention and secondary interventions when there are complaints actual cases of these leadership practices (e.g., Zapf & Vartia, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Our study sheds light on the role of facets of neuroticism, as well as agreeableness, in predicting abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership. Overall, the results support the notion that broader traits can mask important associations between specific facets and harmful leader behaviors, leading to weaker or ambiguous results. The results also illustrate how different facets are related to different forms of poor leadership and that facets can explain more variance to one outcome than another, here more so when it comes to laissez-faire leadership. In addition, the level of one positive disposition can interact and buffer another negative disposition. Moreover, a disposition that is positively related to one negative outcome can be negatively related to another negative outcome, as illustrated by the relationships of angry hostility and abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership, respectively. However, the results indicate only a small prediction in a military selection context and should be replicated in different situations and with different participants to test the generalizability to other populations. Altogether, our findings are important because they advance our understanding of if and when different personality dispositions can come in play and show a promising path for future studies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Norwegian Armed Forces or the other affiliations.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. Due to type of population, character of the data, license, and regulation, restrictions apply to the availability of these data.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. The applicants signed informed consent forms before participating.

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