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How does Laissez-Faire Leadership Affect the Psychosocial Work Environment in the Norwegian Armed Forces - The Moderating Role of Gender

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Affect the Psychosocial Work
Environment in the Norwegian Armed
Forces – The Moderating Role of Gender**

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore a universal perspective that laissez-faire leadership has a negative impact on psychosocial factors at work, including role conflict, stress and motivation. Further, the study aimed to see whether there are differences to how men and women are affected by this form of destructive leadership style. We developed hypotheses proposing that women to a greater extent than men will be affected by this type of leadership, implying that women will react more negatively to a laissez-faire leader. A cross-sectional survey among 9446 employees from the Norwegian Armed Forces showed that laissez-faire leadership positively predicted role conflict and stress, while it negatively predicted motivation. Despite the low effect size of the interaction terms, the moderation in the study revealed that gender moderated the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict, and also between laissez-faire leadership and stress. However, contrary to our predictions, men were seen to be more negatively affected by laissez-faire leadership than women. Limitations, directions for future research, and practical implications were discussed.

Keywords: Destructive leadership, laissez-faire leadership, passive leadership, gender, psychosocial work environment, role conflict, stress, motivation

Introduction

Research concerning leadership has, in general, tended to have a partisan view on leadership in which constructive, effective and successful leadership is emphasised (Kellerman, 2004; Kelloway, Sivanathan, Francis, & Barling, 2005; Yukl, 2013). Widespread concepts that focus on positive leadership behaviour and its effects include transformational leadership (Bass & Stogdill, 1990), authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) and ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). However, during the past few years, researchers have started to direct their attention towards the darker sides of leadership. This includes a variety of different leadership behaviours such as abusive (Tepper, 2000), destructive (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007), bullying (Einarsen, 1999), toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b), tyrannical (Ashforth, 1994), and laissez-faire (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). A destructive leader is considered to behave in ways that are detrimental to the employees and the organisation as a whole.

Despite the increasing interest towards destructive forms of leadership, there is a need to know more about the employees exposed to it (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). An extensive amount of research has proposed the role of gender in leadership, but many have ignored the appearance of such demographics in relation to employees and their experience of destructive leadership (Singh, Dev, & Sengupta, 2017). Instead of looking at individual effects, previous research has mainly studied and presented the effects seen on the workforce as a whole (Chua & Murray, 2015). Thereby, this study seeks to enrich existing literature by including a gender distinction among employees in relation to laissez-faire leadership. There were several reasons for choosing gender as a moderator: (1) it is a major grouping variable (Hall & Buttram, 1994), (2) gender is the personal characteristic that captures the most attention and provides the strongest basis for categorising people, compared to race, age and occupation (Fiske, Gilbert, & Lindzey, 2010), (3) the gender of employees may influence how they perceive leaders as destructive (Chua & Murray, 2015), and (4) since gender may prompt how one reacts to a situation (Singh et al., 2017) it might influence the levels of reported strain (Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007).

Given the prevalence and negative effects of destructive leadership, the key objective of this study was to identify whether men and women experience laissez-faire leadership differently. Thus, the proposed research question is:

“Are there differences in how women and men perceive and react to laissez-faire leadership?”

The study seeks to examine laissez-faire leadership within the Norwegian Armed Forces (NAF), which is the Norwegian military organisation responsible for taking care of and protecting the country. This entails ensuring Norway's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political freedom of action (Forsvaret, 2014). With nearly 16 000 employees in 2017 (Forsvaret, 2016b), the organisation proves to be one of the largest employers in the country. Previous research has shown that destructive leadership is present within several Norwegian organisations (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010), which makes it reasonable to believe that such leadership might also be present within the NAF. The employees are considered to be the most important resource in the NAF and their well-being is a determining factor for the organisation's effectiveness. However, only a limited amount of research has focused on a military context (Tepper, 2007) and examined whether these employees continuously experience laissez-faire leadership at their workplace.

Over the last years, Norway and Europe have faced an uncertain and demanding security situation which has affected the use and function of the NAF (Utenriks- og Forsvarskomiteen, 2015). The goal of defending the country has developed, and is now about being an operative and mobile force for international missions. This implies that the NAF is dependent upon a diverse workforce with a broad expertise. In 2015, the organisation introduced conscription for both genders, being the first NATO member and European country to make military service compulsory for both men and women (Forsvaret, 2016c). The initiative is intended to make the NAF more reflective of the Norwegian society with gender equality. In addition, it intends to make it easier to connect personnel and skills to different tasks as there are more people to choose from (Forsvaret, 2016a). In 2015 only 17,39% of the people working within the NAF were females. Among these, 41,9% were military and 58,11% were civilian employees (Forsvaret,

2016b). Thus, there is a majority of male employees within the organisation, which might have implications for the work environment and social relations. However, with an increasing number of women entering the workforce, it becomes necessary to gain a concrete understanding of similarities and differences between the male and female employees (Bellou, 2011). A gender distinction between employees is therefore of interest when investigating laissez-faire leadership within the NAF.

The present study has two parts. The first part looks to explore a universal perspective suggesting laissez-faire leadership to affect psychosocial factors at work. Thus, it aims to support earlier research conducted on the same topic. Secondly, the study will investigate whether these relationships actually are as universal and generally understandable as previous research has assumed, by using gender as a moderator. In this way, the study is able to complement and extend research by separating the individuals experiencing a laissez-faire leader.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Leadership in a Military Context

According to the NAF, leadership can be defined as “an activity where one through different measures tries to reach goals through others” (Forsvarsstaben, 2014). Within a military context, leadership is formally based on command authority to military leaders for the purpose of directing, coordinating and controlling different military operations. This is primarily done through allocation of command authority and a command- and control system consisting of personnel, methods, and procedures (Forsvarsstaben, 2014). Consequently, this indicates that officers traditionally are considered to be military leaders because they are given command authority. The role and position of an officer, however, has changed considerably over the years and is no longer necessarily associated with the same command authority. Despite having the same core tasks of carrying out military operations (Forsvarsstaben, 2007), the environment within the NAF has changed, which makes the position as a leader a more differentiated role to possess.

Mission-based leadership is central to the leadership philosophy of the NAF, and entails that all operations must be seen in accordance with the intention. This form of leadership is rooted in the NAF's military doctrine and emphasise the importance of maintaining professionalism and mutual trust (Forsvarsstaben, 2014). The military leaders govern by specifying *what* is going to be achieved and *why* it is important. Thereafter, it is up to each employee to figure out *how* to proceed in order to reach the goal. In this way, there is room for decentralised decisions and actions in the mind of the leader (Forsvarsstaben, 2014). The way in which assignments are solved may also in certain situations be important so that detailed orders and control are frequently used (Forsvarsstaben, 2014). This suggests that mission-based leadership implies a shift between giving strong orders and decentralisation. It is therefore important that military leaders undergo extensive training to be able to create proper balance and gain trust among employees (Forsvarsstaben, 2014).

Destructive Leadership

Destructive leadership is described in many different forms in the literature, but often in terms of leader characteristics and behaviours (Einarsen et al., 2007). According to Krasikova, Green, and LeBreton (2013) a destructive leader employs a leadership style that involves harmful methods of influencing the employees. Further, Einarsen et al. (2007) defined destructive leadership as “the systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader that violates the legitimate interest of the organisation by undermining and/or sabotaging the organisation's goals, tasks, resources, effectiveness, motivation, well-being and job satisfaction of subordinates”. Destructive leadership is thereby seen to encompass what leaders actually do and what they are expected to do, but also what they omit to do.

Lipman-Blumen (2005b) states that what one employee considers to be behaviours of a destructive leader, might be what another considers to be behaviours of a successful leader. Accordingly, the perceptions of employees determine whether leaders are regarded as destructive (Chua & Murray, 2015). A study conducted by Wong and Giessner (2015) further supports this argument, as it shows how employees use their own empowerment expectations to interpret the behaviours of their leader. If their expectations are either over- or under-fulfilled, the employees tend to attribute the delegation of autonomy and decision making

to laissez-faire leadership (Wong & Giessner, 2015). Consequently, leaders might be perceived as destructive if they fail to meet the expectations of their employees. In their research on the phenomenon, Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) emphasise the fact that destructive leadership is rarely absolute. A destructive leader may not practice destructive behaviour in all situations and towards all employees, but appear as destructive in some situations (Einarsen et al., 2007).

It will be difficult to understand destructive leadership without examining the entire leadership process. A key contribution to the theory of destructive leadership is introduced by Padilla et al. (2007), namely “The Toxic Triangle”, which highlights the fact that negative outcomes may be related to three different domains: destructive leaders, susceptible employees and conducive environment. Kellerman (2004) suggests that destructive leaders are not able to do harm without employees enabling them by either colluding with the leader, refusing to acknowledge the bad leadership, or put in counteractive work. It will also be difficult for destructive leaders to succeed within stable systems, as these systems tend to defeat attempts of long-lasting destructive behaviour (Padilla et al., 2007). With regards to the leaders, people who emphasise self-interest over interests of others and at the extent of others (e.g. narcissism, machiavellianism, psychopathy, charisma, need for power, an ideology of hate etc.) appears to be the common antecedents to destructive leadership (Krasikova et al., 2013; Padilla et al., 2007).

Among the three suggested domains, most extensive research has been conducted on the destructive leaders, and their traits, characteristics, and behaviours (Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012). Furthermore, such research clearly documents that the phenomenon of destructive leadership includes a variety of different behaviours that are not limited to the absence of effective leadership behaviour (Einarsen et al., 2007). It includes many different forms of leadership including abusive (Tepper, 2000), destructive (Einarsen et al., 2007), bullying (Einarsen, Skogstad, & Glasø, 2013), toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005b), tyrannical (Ashforth, 1994), or laissez-faire (Lewin et al., 1939).

Laissez-Faire Leadership

Considering the breadth of concepts used to describe destructive leaders, it seems clear that destructive leadership is not restricted to one type of leadership behaviour, but instead involves a variety of different behaviours. Taking this diversity into account, the present study will address laissez-faire leadership. Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, and Hetland (2007) suggests that laissez-faire is a destructive leadership behaviour, rather than a form of non-leadership, and according to Aasland et al. (2010) it is the most prevalent form of destructive leadership behaviour found in organisations.

Laissez-faire leadership provides little or no direction for the employees (Sharma & Singh, 2013), which makes them free to do work in their own way and responsible for their own decisions (Chaudhry & Javed, 2012). Researchers have described laissez-faire leadership as “the absence of leadership, the avoidance of intervention, or both”, as leaders generally not make any transactions nor agreements with the employees (Skogstad et al., 2007). This indicates that the leader usually refrains from participating in decision making (Bass & Stogdill, 1990) and refuse to take sides in disputes (Kirkbride, 2006). Essentially, the leader tends to withdraw from the leadership role (Kirkbride, 2006). This form of destructive leadership behaviour is considered to be poor, ineffective and highly dissatisfying for employees (Avolio, 2010).

Empirical research on laissez-faire leadership behaviours and their potentially negative influences are relatively limited, despite their possible devastating consequences (Skogstad et al., 2007; Tepper, 2000; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). This also includes health consequences among the employees of a laissez-faire leader (Skogstad et al., 2007).

Laissez-Faire Leadership and Psychosocial Factors

According to Skogstad and Einarsen (2000), psychosocial factors at work can be defined as factors that take place within social arenas, that are influenced by individual psychological processes, and that have consequences for job satisfaction, health and performance. It is possible to connect both positive and negative factors to this term (Skogstad & Einarsen, 2000), however, this study will focus on factors that constitutes a burden for the employees within the NAF. Laissez-faire leadership can generate numerous consequences with various

severity. Research has shown that the perceived behaviours of leaders affect subordinates' performance, and many subordinates note their leader as being the primary source of stress at work (Schaubroeck, Walumbwa, Ganster, & Kepes, 2007). The employees of a laissez-faire leader are likely to develop negative attitudes towards the leader, and show resistance. However, despite the bad influence, many employees tend to go along in order to avoid further destructive behaviour (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). A common denominator for all forms of destructive leadership is that it is harmful for the motivation, health and efficiency of employees (Einarsen, Skogstad, & Aasland, 2010). Thus, it will be reasonable to presume that laissez-faire leadership might impact important aspects within the NAF such as role conflict, motivation and stress among employees. Thus, these psychosocial factors constitute the outcome variables in this study.

Laissez-Faire Leadership and Role Conflict

Role conflict is a valid construct in organisational behaviour research, often associated with negativity (Jackson & Schuler, 1985) and likely to have negative effects on employees (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). It occurs when there are contradictions between different roles and incompatibility between the expected set of behaviours perceived by a person and the role sender (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Mayo, Sanchez, Pastor, and Rodriguez (2012) argued that a role conflict occurs when individuals experience two or more sets of incompatible roles so that fulfillment of one impedes the fulfilment of others. Having conflicting information, an individual is unable to do all that is expected, which could result in a role conflict (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Research has shown that role conflict is closely related to the leader (O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994), and associated with dysfunctional outcomes, such as psychological strain (Jackson & Schuler, 1985).

The experience of laissez-faire leadership by an immediate superior has shown relatively strong associations with elevated levels of role conflict (Skogstad et al., 2007). This is supported in a study by Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø, and Einarsen (2014) who found that laissez-faire leadership to be a key reason for role conflict among employees. When a leader ignores legitimate expectations from employees by his or her lack of presence, involvement, feedback, and rewards, such behaviours may influence the role experiences of the employees (Skogstad et al., 2007). The fact that laissez-faire leadership is a root source of employee role

ambiguity underlines the importance of leaders perceiving situations and circumstances where employees experience a need for leadership and, accordingly, approach this need instead of avoiding it (Skogstad et al., 2014). Thus, previous research seems to confirm that laissez-faire leadership may influence the perceived level of role conflict. Therefore, the following hypothesis emerges:

H1: *Laissez-faire leadership will positively predict role conflict among employees.*

Laissez-Faire Leadership and Stress

Stress is considered to be a two-way process, which suggests that it is a psychological state that will change over time and across different encounters (Lazarus, 1995). The process involves both the creation of stressors by the environment, but also the responses from individuals exposed to these stressors. Lazarus (1995) states that a situation will be perceived as stressful if the transaction between the individual and the environment is seen as harmful, threatening or challenging to the individual's well-being. The way in which people interpret what is happening to their well-being and their options for coping, will therefore determine whether or not stress is an outcome and its intensity. Once a situation has been labelled stressful, it can further create responses that include physiological, cognitive, emotional and behavioural elements that influence health (Davis, Matthews, & Twamley, 1999).

Leadership has in a number of studies been referred to as a possible source of stress at the workplace (Jönsson, Johansson, Rosengren, Lappas, & Wilhelmsen, 2003; McVicar, 2003; Nyberg, Bernin, & Theorell, 2005). One of the proposed reasons is that leaders can be a significant source of stress when they do not fulfil basic obligations and requirements in their leadership role, and especially when employees find themselves in need of leadership (Skogstad et al., 2014). A lack of adequate leadership, which is the case with laissez-faire leadership, may also create frustration and stress within workgroups (Einarsen, 1999) as there is no one in charge with the main responsibility. Consequently, employees may experience stressful work situations characterised by a lack of clarity regarding duties and responsibilities within the organisation (Skogstad et al., 2014). The leadership style may influence how employees cope with stress, and therefore we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: *Laissez-faire leadership will positively predict stress among employees.*

Laissez-Faire Leadership and Motivation

Leadership style is considered to be a crucial determinant of employee motivation. Previous research suggests laissez-faire leadership to be the most ineffective, inactive and dissatisfying form of leadership, as the leader has no attempt to neither motivate, recognise or satisfy the needs of the employees (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Einarsen et al., 2007). In their study on the topic, Gopal and Chowdhury (2014) found laissez-faire leadership to have negative influence on employee's motivation. This is also supported in research by Judge and Piccolo (2004), who found this type of leadership to have strong and negative correlations with employees' motivation and satisfaction with the leader. Additionally, Judge and Piccolo (2004) argue the absence of leadership to be of equal importance as the presence of other forms of leadership.

The type of motivation explored within the present study is related to intrinsic motivation and engagement in own work. Intrinsic motivation is seen as behaviour conducted with its basis in intrinsic rewards including feelings of satisfaction, competence, self-esteem, interest, joy or meaning to the task conducted (Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2012). This suggests that employees who are intrinsically motivated work on tasks because they find them interesting and meaningful, and that participation is rewarding in itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Compared to extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation is considered to be a healthier form of motivation that is linked to a variety of individual and organisational factors. This includes higher employee satisfaction, greater work performance, more extra-role behaviour, lower turnover intention, lower burnout, (Kuvaas & Buch, 2014) and a perceived social relation to the organisation (Buch, Dysvik, & Kuvaas, 2016). Thereby, it is crucial for leaders to promote a work climate that contributes to enhancing the intrinsic motivation of employees.

Several theories have been used to explain sources of intrinsic motivation, in which self-determination theory is one of the most utilised. The theory argue that three factors are essential for intrinsic motivation, namely the satisfaction of the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Gagné & Deci, 2005). According to self-determination theory, the most salient of these is the need for autonomy (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2011), which refers to being the perceived

origin of source for one's own behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In a work context, this suggests that leaders should exercise less control and micromanagement, and promote opportunities for employees to make decisions on their own and take initiative.

Some researchers have proposed laissez-faire leadership to be a facilitator of intrinsic motivation, because the psychological need for autonomy among employees will be satisfied (Yang, 2015). The employees are free to make their own decisions and choose how and when to complete their tasks. In this way it may be considered empowering, but it can also be regarded as avoiding responsibility and not provide guidance (Sosik, Potosky, & Jung, 2002; Wong & Giessner, 2015). In order for empowerment behaviours to be effective, the employees must value this form of leadership. Increased autonomy is dependent on employees having the willingness, skills, resources and psychological support necessary to be able to handle new responsibilities (Yukl, 2012). This suggests that leaders should not provide autonomy and retire into a passive role, but rather play an active role by continuously supporting and developing the employees (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). This is also supported in the research of Ryan and Deci (2000), who emphasise the fact that leaders play a critical role in developing intrinsic motivation among employees by providing both recognition and involvement.

Consequently, we argue that laissez-faire leadership will have a negative effect on the psychosocial work environment by reducing individuals experience of motivation and engagement. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *Laissez-faire leadership will negatively predict motivation among employees.*

The Moderating Role of Gender

Gender is a biological phenomenon that is fundamental for all human beings as they by birth is placed within one or the other category, namely men or women (Drake & Solberg, 1995). What determines the difference are the chromosomes and hormones, as they have an impact on the development of the brain and the body of the human being (Drake & Solberg, 1995). Even though there are numerous biological similarities between men and women, there are also some fundamental differences. Not only do the genders differ in their physical attributes

and reproductive function, but also with regards to solving and handling intellectual problems (Kimura, 1992).

In this way, biological differences can be extended to differences in information processing. It is argued that men and women tend to ascribe similar words and actions different meaning. Tannen (1991) substantiate this by stating that men and women may have totally different and emotional motives or actions behind their words. According to Chua and Murray (2015), there has been little attention towards how men and women perceive information differently based on their gender. However, it is suggested that men and women practise different strategies and have different thresholds for processing information (Meyers-Levy & Loken, 2015). While women engage in substantial and detailed elaboration of message content, men are more likely to be driven by the overall message themes (Meyers-Levy & Loken, 2015; Putrevu et al., 2001).

Skowronski and Carlston (1989) show that extreme or negative information often receive more attention than positive information as it is perceived to be more diagnostic. As reported by Putrevu et al. (2001), this suggests that women elaborate more on negative information and emotions, because the negative is granted greater diagnostic value. Men are more likely to value positive information and emotions over negative, as they are more heuristic processors (Putrevu et al., 2001). If men and women perceive and process information differently, there might also be differences to how the genders react to leadership, workplace environment and stimuli (Adepoju, Ajiboye, & Koleoso, 2016). Singh et al. (2017) found that perceived destructiveness in leaders was best predicted by the gender of the employees only, compared to other demographics such as age and education. Their findings argue that destructiveness will be perceived differently by the genders, in which women perceive more destructiveness in their leader than men. Further, women appeared to be more sensitive and influenced by negative behaviours in interpersonal relationships than men (Singh et al., 2017).

On the basis of such arguments, one could argue that gender might have a moderating effect on laissez-faire leadership and psychosocial factors at work. Instead of looking at individual effect, previous research has mainly studied the effects of such form of leadership on the workforce as a whole (Chua & Murray, 2015). Thus, how it affects employees differently has rarely been studied

(Skogstad et al., 2014). Nyberg et al. (2005) suggests that research should be directed towards the relationship between leader and employees, in order to analyse how the influence of a leader can impact employees' health. As Barbuto, Fritz, Matkin, and Marx (2007) requested research on the contextual nature of gender, the present study tries to answer this call by separating the individuals experiencing a laissez-faire leader. Consequently, the moderating effect of gender might provide future insight into the field of leadership.

Gender as Moderator to the Laissez-Faire – Role Conflict Relationship

Previous research has found laissez-faire leadership to be associated with role conflict (Skogstad et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2014). One consequence of the recent struggle for greater equality between the genders has led to an increase in women's roles (Coverman, 1989). Role conflict has been investigated in family- and work-related contexts (Coverman, 1989; Hall, 1972; Rizzo et al., 1970), reporting role conflict to have greater psychical consequences for women given their total workloads. Further, role conflict is suggested to be detrimental to women's psychological health (Coverman, 1989). All the review studies concerning gender and role conflict seem to be rather old. Further, none of the studies in the reviewed literature separate the employees experiencing laissez-faire leadership, when looking at role conflict. Thus, this study aims to contribute to existing literature, resulting in the following hypothesis:

H4a: *Gender moderates the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict. Women will report more role conflict than men when experiencing a laissez-faire leader at the workplace.*

Gender as Moderator to the Laissez-Faire – Stress Relationship

The way in which people deal and respond to situations that are considered stressful is called coping. It is emphasised that coping refers to all efforts to manage different demands, regardless the success of those efforts (Folkman, 1984). When experiencing stress, most people will try to cope with or alter the stress-provoking conditions in order to reduce strain symptoms (Jick & Mitz, 1985). Thus, coping is seen to have a thorough effect on physical and emotional states (Lazarus, 1995). When connecting coping behaviours to gender differences the concept suggests that men and women might cope with stress differently in

their everyday life, including stress related to a laissez-faire leader. Gender is seen to affect each step in the stress process by determining whether a situation is perceived as stressful, but also by influencing the coping response and health implications (Barnett, Biener, & Baruch, 1987).

One of the most utilised classifications of coping distinguish between problem focused and emotion focused behaviours (Folkman, 1984; Matud, 2004; Rosario, Shinn, Mørch, & Huckabee, 1988; Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). This distinction is normally mentioned when gender comparisons are made (Tamres et al., 2002). However, existing literature on gender differences in coping is considered to have inconclusive findings. Several studies concede that men are more likely to make use of problem-focused coping behaviours when experiencing stress, while women are more likely to employ emotion-focused coping behaviours (Miller & Kirsch, 1987; Ptacek, Smith, & Dodge, 1994). Thus, this line of research suggests that men have a tendency to deal with stressful situations by addressing the problem, whereas women use behaviours to regulate their emotional response. Even though it is not evident whether women experience emotion more often than men, researchers have stated that women might experience emotions more intensively and also express them more frequently (Tamres et al., 2002). This indicates that men and women might experience and cope with stress related to a laissez-faire leader in the workplace differently.

Matud (2004) stated that men have more difficulties in undertaking and communicating feelings of weakness, incompetence or fear. Accordingly, when experiencing stress, they are more likely to cope by rejecting or avoiding the problem as they are socialised to conceal emotions (Tamres et al., 2002). The fact that they are considered active, supports the notion of them employing a problem-focused coping response (Rosario et al., 1988). Women are considered to more easily express emotions, and can thereby explain how they make use of social support networks and ask for help more frequently when experiencing stress (Jick & Mitz, 1985).

In their research on work-related stress, Jick and Mitz (1985) suggests that women face several unique sources of stress at work such as lack of mentors and female

support groups, lower salaries, career blocks, and masculine job stereotypes because of their minority or powerless work status. Thus, they might be considered to be relatively disadvantaged compared to men in terms of mobility and influence at work. Furthermore, researchers emphasise the fact that working women often experience more stress as they often hold roles as both homemaker and career women (Davis et al., 1999; Jick & Mitz, 1985). Such arguments contribute to a possible explanation of why women might experience more stress than men when having a laissez-faire leader. Feelings of little control and influence over the work situation may lead to a view that problem-focused coping is risky, useless or even impossible (Tamres et al., 2002). Nevertheless, Matud (2004) states that women, more often than men, perceive having insufficient resources for coping with a threatening situation and consequently see the situation as unchangeable. Therefore, women might find it easier to take a passive and emotion-focused stance in stressful situations and turn to others for support.

This study aims to contribute to existing literature by investigating whether there are gender differences in work-related stress when experiencing a laissez-faire leader. On the basis of the arguments in how men and women cope with stress differently, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H4b: *Gender will moderate the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and stress. Women will report more stress than men when experiencing a laissez-faire leader at the workplace.*

Gender as Moderator to the Laissez-Faire – Motivation Relationship

Recent literature on leadership emphasise the fact that leaders are able to affect employees through different psychological and interpersonal relationships such as motivation (Larsson, Sjöberg, Nilsson, Alvinus, & Bakken, 2007). This is evident in several studies who acknowledge laissez-faire leadership to have a negative impact on employees' motivation and engagement at work (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Gopal & Chowdhury, 2014; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

There have been some studies investigating gender differences in relation to intrinsic motivation at work. For instance, several researchers have reported that positive feedback tend to increase the intrinsic motivation of men, while it

decreases the intrinsic motivation for women (Deci, Cascio, & Krusell, 1973; Koestner, Zuckerman, & Koestner, 1987; Zinser, Young, & King, 1982). This has been explained by the fact that positive feedback can be considered both informational as it affirms individuals' self-determined competence, but also controlling as it can control individuals' behaviour by capitalising on their need to be liked. Thus, it is suggested that women are more susceptible to being controlled by positive feedback than men and will therefore experience it as more controlling (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Another example of gender differences in intrinsic motivation found is related to competition. According to Weinberg and Ragan (1979), men tend to be more intrinsically motivated when they operate within competitive settings, while females display no difference in intrinsic motivation in competitive and non-competitive settings. The way in which the intrinsic motivation of men and women might be affected by laissez-faire leadership however, is scarcely explored.

Some suggests men and women to have significant differences with regards to motivational preferences. A survey conducted by Norstat explored gender differences, by asking approximately 2500 Norwegian employees to state their three most important factors for intrinsic motivation at work (Oseid, 2017). The findings proposed few gender differences, as both men and women found the pleasure of doing a good job as the most important factor for intrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, one key difference was that women placed more emphasis on fellowship and affiliation as an important motivational factor. This suggests that women, to a larger extent than men, are concerned with the social environment and are more relationship-oriented at the workplace (Oseid, 2017). Wiley (1997) found that women to a larger degree acknowledge appreciation for work done and good working conditions as important motivators at work, while males place more emphasis on interesting work tasks. According to Arnanian-Kepuladze (2010), gender stereotypes may be another explanation for why men and women might have different preferences, goals, and motivations. The researcher states that the satisfaction of stereotypical masculine needs will be more typical of men, and thereby earnings, freedom, advancement, challenge, and possibility to use skills will be significant motivators at work. In line with feminine stereotypes, the researcher suggests that women typically will be concerned with fulfilling family-oriented needs. Thus, for women, interpersonal relationships, security, and work

environment are more significant motivators (Armania-Kepuladze, 2010). This is in line with Hofstede (2003), who found men to be motivated by earnings, promotion and responsibility, and women by a friendly atmosphere, job-security, cooperation and work environment conditions.

Pfeffer (1998) argues that the key to long-term success is how organisations manage their employees, since creating meaningful work and keeping them happy is vital to foster organisational effectiveness. Thereby, workplace attributes will play a big role in motivating employees. The workplace attributes can play an intrinsic motivational role as it fosters employees' growth, learning, and development (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Several researchers have shed light on how men and women differ in terms of workplace attribute inclinations. Men tend to emphasise long-term career objectives, opportunities to earn money and the possibility to influence important decisions as important job attributes. Women, on the other hand, place more emphasis on interpersonal job attributes, including comfortable work environment, good relationships and opportunities to work with pleasant colleagues (Bigoness, 1988; Manhardt, 1972; Schuler, 1975). A meta-analysis conducted by Konrad, Ritchie Jr, Lieb, and Corrigan (2000) have similar findings as they concluded men and women to seek attributes in jobs that are consistent with gender role and stereotypes. While men preferred opportunities for earnings, promotion, freedom, challenges, leadership, and power, women valued attributes such as interpersonal relationships and helping others.

When considering the gender differences in motivational preferences, one could argue that men and women are likely to react differently when experiencing a laissez-faire leader. Since women place greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships and work environment, bad experiences in these areas will adversely affect their motivation compared to men. This gives rise to the following hypothesis:

H4c: *Gender will moderate the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and motivation. Women will report less motivation than men when experiencing a laissez-faire leader at the workplace.*

Research model

The introduced hypotheses are presented in the following research model:

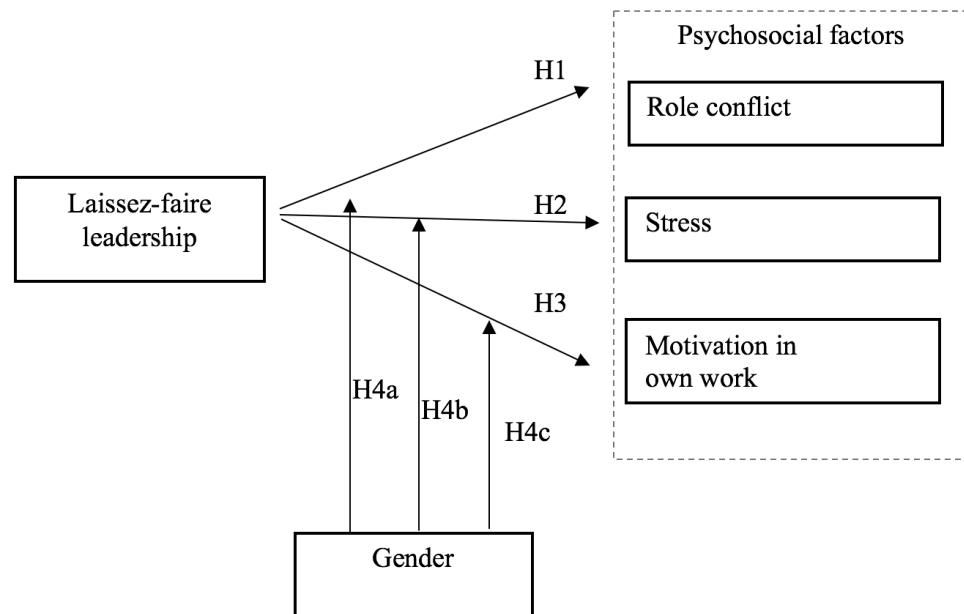


Figure 1: Research model

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

The data used in this study was obtained by the NAF in 2015 and consisted of two different surveys that were conducted simultaneously and within the same type of questionnaire, namely the Norwegian Armed Forces Employee Survey (NES) and the Norwegian Armed Forces Health Survey (NHS). The questions formulated in NES were retrieved from QPS Nordic, a general questionnaire to map out psychological and social factors at work (Forsvaret, 2015; Skogstad et al., 2001). In NHS, the employees were requested to answer self-assessment questions regarding their physical health and activity, psychological health, and their use of alcohol and tobacco (Forsvarets Sanitet, 2014).

The two electronic surveys were distributed to a population consisting of 15 972 employees, meaning all employees within the NAF excluding those in foreign residences or hidden departments. Among these, 10 041 answered both surveys, which gave a response rate of 62,9%. The final sample that proved suitable for our analysis consisted of N=9446, resulting in an overall response rate of 59,1%. Out

of the respondents, 17,4% were women and 82,6% were men. The majority were military employed (69,7%), while approximately one third (30,3%) of the employees were civilian employed. The age of the respondents ranged between 19 to 71 years, in which the mean age was 39. The data was registered and processed by the Armed Forces Health Register, and saved as an anonymised SPSS file. Because the study consisted of anonymised data, it is not possible to transfer data back to the respective participant. Therefore, the study was approved by the Norwegian Social Data Service (Personvernombudet, 2018).

Measures

Demographic variables: The respondents were asked to report their gender by way of a dichotomous variable in which 1 = *man* and 0 = *woman*. Further, they were asked to report whether they were military employed by a dichotomous variable labelled Military/Civilian, where 1 = *military employed* and 2 = *civilian employed*. Finally, the age of the respondents was measured using a five-item scale (*under 30 years, 31-35 years, 36-40 years, 41-50 years, and above 50 years*).

To rule out the possibility that pre-existing differences such as demographics accounted for the observed relationships, we sought to strengthen the internal validity by the inclusion of exogenous variables (Kuvaas, Buch, & Dysvik, 2012). More specifically, we controlled for the demographic variables of age and type of employment (military or civilian) in the analysis.

Laissez-faire leadership was measured using a 4-item scale derived from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Each item was rated using a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The questions participants were asked to rate included “to what extent do you feel that your leader: avoid involvement when important issues arise, avoid making decisions, is not present, and do not answer questions”.

Stress was measured by a 7-item scale in NHS based on CONOR Mental Health Index (CONOR MHI), which seeks to measure different aspects of stress and dissatisfaction. The scale measured self-reported mental conditions including nervousness, anxiety, depression and loneliness. Participants were asked to rate

each item using a 4-point Likert scale with the following range: 1 = *no*, 2 = *somewhat*, 3 = *a good deal*, 4 = *a lot*. The question asked was: “Have you the last two weeks felt? a) nervous and uneasy, b) bothered by anxiety, c) safe and calm, d) irritable, e) happy and optimistic, f) down and depressed and g) lonely”.

Role conflict was measured using a 3-item scale from QPSNordic. The items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 = *very seldom or never*, 2 = *rather seldom*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *rather often* and 5 = *very often or always*. One example of the questions given included: “Do you receive incompatible requests from two or more people?”.

Motivation in own work was measured on a single item in NES. Participants were asked to answer the question “how often do you feel motivated and engaged in your own work?”, using a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1 = *very seldom or never* to 5 = *very often or always*.

Analysis

The data was analysed in several steps. In order to ensure internal consistency of the items measured, a reliability test was performed to examine their Cronbach’s alfa values. To determine item retention an exploratory principal component analysis with promax rotation was conducted on all multiple-scale items (Hurley et al., 1997; Medsker, Williams, & Holahan, 1994). Since motivation in own work was measured on a single item, it was excluded from the PCA-analysis. All items with loading less than .05 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 2007), a cross-loading more than .35 (Kiffin-Petersen & Cordery, 2003), and a differential less than .20 (Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch, 1994) were removed for further analyses in order to avoid confounded measures of closely related constructs. To test for heteroscedasticity in our data, a visual evaluation of scatterplots and statistical estimation through a Breusch-Pagan Test (Breusch & Pagan, 1979) was computed. The threat of multicollinearity was tested by estimating the variance inflation factor (VIF) for all of the independent variables (Mansfield & Helms, 1982; Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2016).

To explore findings from previous studies (hypotheses 1-3), regression models were computed for each of the dependent variables (role conflict, stress and motivation in own work), using *laissez-faire* leadership as the predictor

(independent variable). The robust option for estimating the standard errors was chosen in all regression models, to account for issues concerning heteroscedasticity (Hoechle, 2007; White, 1980).

Further, to test the moderation hypotheses (hypotheses 4a-c), hierarchical moderated regression was employed (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Using an interaction term tend to create multicollinearity problems because of their correlations with main effects (Aiken & West, 1991). Therefore, the interaction term was computed by centering the variables before multiplying them with each other. Since gender was a dummy variable, there was no need for centering it in the interaction term (Williams, 2015b). We followed the step-down hierarchical moderated regression method recommended by Aiken and West (1991). Cohen and Cohen (1983) argued demographics to be good candidates for initial step entry. Therefore, in the first and second step, the control variables and laissez-faire leadership were regressed on each of the dependent variables (role conflict, stress, motivation), followed by gender, and finally, the interaction term between laissez-faire leadership and gender.

To probe the form of interaction, recommended practice by Aiken and West (1991) was followed, and low versus high scores on laissez-faire leadership and the moderator (one standard deviation below and above means using unstandardised scores) was plotted. Following tests were performed to determine whether the slopes were significantly different from zero and each other. The effect size of the interaction term was measured to probe the practical significance because a large sample size could report statistical significance, even when it is not (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). Finally, additional tests such as one-way and two-way between-groups ANOVA was computed to further investigate the main effects and interaction effects, and confirm the results from the regression analysis.

Results

The reliability analysis revealed that none of the items reduced measures' reliability. Hence, all items were included when computing the final scale. The operations resulted in a four-item laissez-faire scale ($\alpha = .88$), a three-item role

conflict scale ($\alpha = .74$), a seven-item stress scale ($\alpha = .74$), and a single-item motivation scale.

PCA was computed on all multiple-items, in order to estimate item factor loadings. The analysis with promax rotation is reported in Appendix 1. In our case, all factor loadings proved to be statistically significant and were therefore retained. The results from the PCA extracted three factors, explaining 56.79% of the variance. Because motivation was measured on a single-item, it was excluded from the principal component analysis. The items were combined to form their respective variables by summarising the mean value for each item that loaded on the same factor (Field, 2013). The use of average scores are considered useful when factors have a different number of items (DiStefano, Zhu, & Mindrila, 2009). This resulted in a total of four variables (including motivation as an individual variable). Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all four variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Scale Reliabilities

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Age	2.974	1.571	-						
Gender	0.826	0.380	-0.027***	-					
Military/ Civilian	0.697	0.460	-0.364***	0.278***	-				
Laissez- faire leadership	1.844	0.923	0.072***	-0.009	-0.111***	-	(.88)		
Stress	1.480	0.414	-0.092***	-0.016	0.019*	0.218***	-	(.74)	
Role Conflict	2.634	0.774	-0.072***	0.101***	0.114***	0.288***	0.297***	-	(.74)
Motivation	4.010	0.814	0.088***	-0.046***	-0.018*	-0.239***	-0.368***	-0.246***	-

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$, Coefficient alphas are shown on the diagonal.

Examination of the correlation matrix made it possible to examine the interrelationship between all variables. The highest correlation was between stress and motivation (-.37), which was lower than .70, a critical value argued by (Meyers et al., 2016).

Multicollinearity between the independent variables was inspected prior to the analyses using collinearity diagnostics. The obtained VIF in all linear regressions

conducted was below the recommended value of 10 (Meyers et al., 2016), with the highest being 5.27. The lowest tolerance value obtained was 0.19, which exceeds the common cutoff threshold value of .10 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Hence, there was no evidence of multicollinearity.

A Breusch-Pagan test revealed heteroscedasticity in our dataset (Breusch & Pagan, 1979). The χ^2 – value was significant for the dependent variables predicting the independent variable (i.e. role conflict: χ^2 [12.93], $p < 0.0003$, stress: χ^2 [241.04] $p < 0.000$, and motivation: χ^2 [162.25] $p < 0.000$). Hence, the heterogeneous distribution of variance in our regression model increased the likelihood of type II error, suggesting that the results must be interpreted with caution. To address the problem of heteroscedasticity, the robust option for estimating standard errors was used to validate the p-values in the linear regressions (Hoechle, 2007; Williams, 2015a).

Hierarchical linear regression was performed to test hypotheses 1-3. The control variables, Age and Military/civilian, were entered into the regression model prior to the independent variable (laissez-faire leadership). The regression analysis showed that laissez-faire leadership contributed to significantly predicting all of the dependent variables, which suggests that the presence of laissez-faire leadership has an impact on the psychosocial work environment within the NAF. The analysis supported hypotheses H1-H3. A summary of the results is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Result from Hierarchical Regression Analysis

	H1: Role Conflict	H2: Stress	H3: Motivation
Age	-0.047***	-0.106***	0.103***
Military/Civilian	0.133***	0.006	-0.008
Laissez-faire leadership	0.306***	0.226***	-0.248***
ΔR^2	0.0922***	0.0505***	0.0605***
R^2	0.1064	0.0592	0.0685
F	337.27***	158.56***	183.54***

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

A moderated hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to test whether gender moderated the relationship between the dependent variables (role conflict,

stress, and motivation) and the independent variable (laissez-faire leadership). Table 3 depicts the results of the moderated hierarchical regression analysis. The significant interaction terms in the moderated hierarchical regression revealed that gender moderated the relationships between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict, and laissez-faire leadership and stress. With respect to effect size, the interaction terms ($\Delta R^2 = .0005$, $p < .01$) in both cases represent a very low increase in the total amount of variance explained. There was no significant interaction term for motivation. Hence, H4c is not supported in our study as none of the genders seem to moderate the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and motivation.

Concerning the relationship between laissez-faire leadership, role conflict and gender, it is worth noting that both genders had a significant and moderating effect. When investigating the slopes in Figure 2, one can see that laissez-faire leadership had a stronger and more predictive relationship for male employees, $\beta = 0.264$, $p < 0.001$, than female employees, $\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$. A supplemental t-test revealed that the two slopes were significantly different from each other, $t = 2.064$, $p < 0.05$. As these results indicated that men tend to experience more role conflict when the leader is perceived to be laissez-faire. Our hypothesis (H4a) that women experience more role conflict when the leader is perceived to be laissez-faire is therefore rejected.

As the slopes in Figure 3 suggests, there is a positive relationship between laissez-faire leadership and stress for both men, $\beta = 0.107$, $p < 0.001$. and women, $\beta = 0.081$, $p < 0.001$. However, the relationship is stronger and more predictive for men. The supplemental t-test revealed that the difference between the slopes is statistically significant, $t = 1.845$, $p < 0.05$. As such, although a significant interaction was found, it was opposite of what was hypothesized, lending no support to H4b. Men tend to experience more stress when the leader is perceived to be laissez-faire. Women on their hand, experience higher levels of stress in total at work.

Table 3: Result from Moderated Hierarchical Regression Analysis

	H4a: Role Conflict	H4b: Stress	H4c: Motivation
Age	-0.053***	-0.105***	0.107***
Military/Civilian	0.110***	0.013	0.007
Laissez-faire leadership	0.258***	0.181***	-0.249***
Gender	0.071***	-0.021*	-0.048***
Laissez-faire leadership x gender	0.051**	0.051*	0.003
ΔR^2	0.0005***	0.0005***	0***
R^2	0.1116	0.0601	0.0705
F	217.43***	97.70***	117.15***

*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1

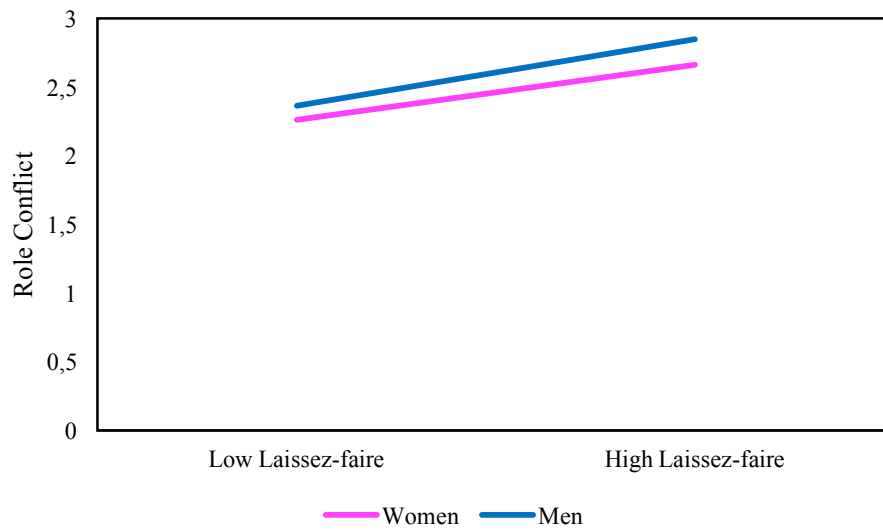


Figure 2: The moderating role of gender on the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict.

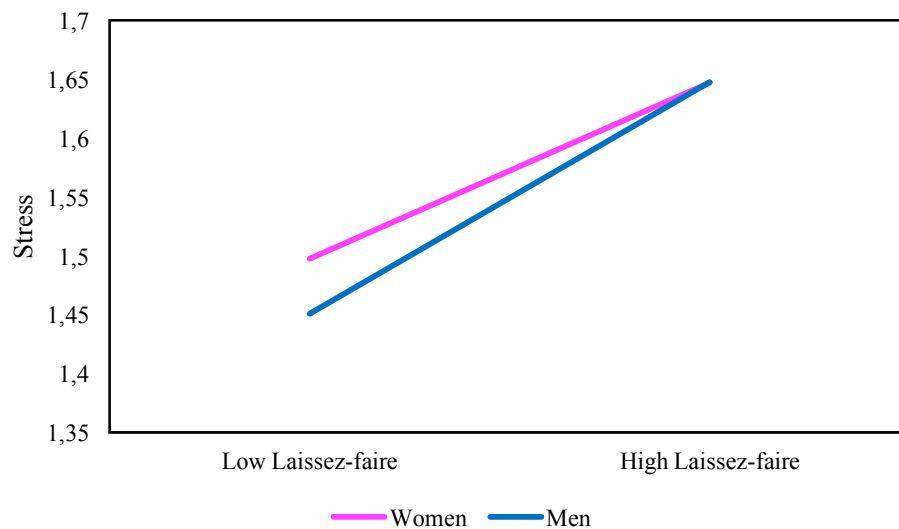


Figure 3: The moderating role of gender on the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and stress.

Discussion

The present study had two purposes. The first purpose was to investigate a universal perspective that laissez-faire leadership is related to psychological factors at work including role conflict, stress and motivation, aiming to support what has already been established in existing theories and research. The second purpose was to explore whether the relationships actually were as universal and generally understandable as previously assumed. This was done by integrating gender as a moderator and separate the individuals experiencing a laissez-faire leader. Interestingly, the study offers new insight about how a laissez-faire leadership may influence male and female employees differently.

The low effect size measured in the study could be because of the sample, since a large sample creates issues of guaranteed statistical significance (Khalilzadeh & Tasci, 2017) and sampling variability (Kirk, 1996). Although this study has found statistical significance on the moderating effect of gender in H4a and H4b, the findings may not have practical significance, and thereby further implications for the real world (Kirk, 1996). Thus, the significant differences found between men and women might be due to our large sample size, and must be taken into consideration when interpreting the results.

Laissez-Faire Leadership and Role Conflict

The regression analysis found a significant positive relationship between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict, which is in line with research conducted by Skogstad et al. (2014). The correlation between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict can further be compared to findings Jackson and Schuler (1985) had in their meta-study, indicating that concepts of laissez-faire leadership negatively correlate with role conflict. Einarsen et al. (2007) concluded in their study that the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and workplace stressors (such as role conflict) are not mainly explained by the lack of constructive leadership, but rather by the presence of laissez-faire leadership. Clarifications of employees' roles and responsibilities could be argued to be one of the main tasks of a leader, and missing clarifications of roles from the leader seems to be one of the most stressful aspects for employees (O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994; Skogstad et al., 2014). Addressing the leader-employee relationship, the present study shows that the more a leader is perceived to be laissez-faire, the more role conflict an employee

will experience. The result from this study also propose that, military employees scored higher on role conflict than civilian employees, and that the older you are, the less you experience a role conflict.

Laissez-Faire Leadership and Stress

In line with our second hypothesis, we found that there was a significant positive relationship between laissez-faire leadership and stress, as expected on the basis of previous research (Einarsen, 1999; Skogstad et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2014). This suggests that the presence of laissez-faire leadership within the NAF may contribute in enhancing employees experience of work-related stress. What characterises laissez-faire leadership behaviours is that leaders avoid making decisions, abdicate responsibility and do not make use of their authority (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008). As stated in research conducted by Kelloway et al. (2005), the lack of presence from a leader have the potential to negatively affect several factors including the work load, work pace, scheduling, role stressors, interpersonal relations, work content and social support. Accordingly, a laissez-faire leader may cause additional stress to the employees as they become responsible for keeping the operations running and because they must undertake additional work without any guidance or support. This finding thereby supports previous research suggesting laissez-faire not to be a form of zero-leadership, but rather a destructive leadership behaviour that affects the psychosocial work environment (Skogstad et al., 2007).

As mentioned in relation to H1, this finding also suggests that older employees experience less stress in relation to laissez-faire leadership. This builds upon Hertel et al. (2013) who argue that older employees report less stress at work. Because older employees have more work experience and over time has learned to make use of coping resources, their ability to reduce stress when a leader is not present might be enhanced.

Laissez-Faire Leadership and Motivation

Laissez-faire leadership was in the hierarchical linear regression analysis found to have a significant negative relationship with motivation in own work. Hence, the finding suggests that having a laissez-faire leader is thus significantly related with the likelihood of losing motivation at work. This finding aligns with research by

Musinguzi et al. (2018), Gopal and Chowdhury (2014), and Judge and Piccolo (2004), who also found laissez-faire leadership to negatively correlate employees' motivation. A laissez-faire leader show no attempt to motivate their employees (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Supervision and communication is found to be important factors in terms of employee motivation (Gopal & Chowdhury, 2014), especially in a military context where a leader shifts between giving strong orders and decentralisation. This could imply that having a laissez-faire leader affects the motivation in own work for employees since the leader show no attempt in participating in decision making, and tends to withdraw from the leadership role. In addition, a moderate and significant negative correlation between motivation in own work and stress was found in the present study. However, this result can be interpreted in two directions: motivated employees are less exposed to or more tolerant of work-related stress, or high levels of work-related stress cause less motivated employees. Thus, our result suggests that when the leader is perceived to be laissez-faire, a motivated employee will be less exposed to work-related stress.

The Moderating Role of Gender on Laissez-Faire Leadership and Role Conflict

The moderated hierarchical regression analysis found that the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict is being moderated by gender. This novel observation showed that both among men and women there is a significant positive relationship between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict. However, contrary to our hypothesis, the result suggests that when perceived laissez-faire leadership increases, men tend to experience higher levels of role conflict than women.

Contrary to the finding in the present study, several researchers has found that multiple roles operating on the same time leads to greater role conflict experienced for women than men (Coverman, 1989; Killian, 1952; Rizzo et al., 1970). However, role conflict is also found to be negatively related to males satisfaction with their leader (Boles, Wood, & Johnson, 2003). Thus, if male employees are unsatisfied with their leader, i.e. if the leader is not present, they are more likely to experience role conflict. Research has also found laissez-faire leaders to be a root cause of role conflict, as the level of a conflict can escalate

when there is inadequate leadership (Einarsen, 1999; Kelloway et al., 2005). Women are more likely than men, to give up part of their own needs in order to compromise others (Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002; Holt & DeVore, 2005). Arguably, this implies that women might experience less role conflict if the leader is perceived to be laissez-faire, supporting the finding in the present study. Women are more likely to operate within the boundaries and constraint of a given role, whilst men are more likely to test boundaries and alter constraints (Hall, 1972). Since the way in which assignments are solved is important in a military context, detailed orders and control are decisive. However, in contrast, in laissez-faire leadership the leader will provide little or no direction for the employees. This could result in role conflict for men, since they tend to take on additional responsibility outside their boundaries and given role.

To our knowledge, previous studies have not addressed gender differences when it comes the perception of laissez-faire leadership and role conflict. Thus, by indicating that gender moderates the influences of laissez-faire leadership behaviours, this finding complements and extend existing research.

The Moderating Role of Gender on Laissez-Faire Leadership and Stress

One of the principal findings in this study was that the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and stress is being moderated by gender, which to our knowledge is a novel observation. Moreover, we note that the form of the moderation described male employees to experience more stress than female employees when the perception of laissez-faire leadership increased. Hence, despite the fact that much previous research and theory (Davis et al., 1999; Jick & Mitz, 1985) note women to experience more work-related stress and more unique sources of stress at work, our finding indicate that men are more inclined to feel stressed when poor leadership in the form of laissez-faire is present.

A potential explanation for this finding could be that laissez-faire leadership affects factors at work that male employees consider more critical. In a study conducted by Spielberger and Reheiser (1994) the overall stress levels among men and women at work were fairly similar. However, the researchers found numerous gender differences with regards to perceived severity and the frequency

of occurrence of individual stressor events. Furthermore, Matud (2004) concluded approximately half of the stressful events listed by men and women to be significantly different. Previous research has stated that women are more affected by health-related events and job interfering with family life, while men report work-related factors as critical stressors including increased job demands, overtime, administrative tasks, time pressure and conflicts (Cooper, Rout, & Faragher, 1989; Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2013; Matud, 2004; Michael, Anastasios, Helen, Catherine, & Christine, 2009; Rivera-Torres, Araque-Padilla, & Montero-Simó, 2013). Accordingly, in relation to our finding, the male employees might experience more stress than the female employees because laissez-faire leadership increases the number of work-related stressors.

Another possible explanation for why men experience more stress when having a laissez-faire leader can be grounded in previous research conducted on coping. Although women are considered to make less use of problem-focused coping behaviours than men (Miller & Kirsch, 1987), research state that they are better at expressing their emotions (Jick & Mitz, 1985). In the case with a laissez-faire leader, this suggests that men are more inclined to solve the problem on their own, while women seek support in their network. Consequently, it is possible that women's use of emotion-focused coping short circuit the stress process, as they are able to ventilate to others and neutralise their feelings of stress.

In general, this finding proposes a more accurate understanding of how laissez-faire leadership influence on organisations may be obtained by separating the employees. Although we should be careful in making causal inferences, the study provides findings of gender differences in stress when experiencing a laissez-faire leader. Thus, the contribution extends previous literature and research by introducing the moderating role of gender on the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and psychosocial factors at work.

The Moderating Role of Gender on Laissez-Faire Leadership and Motivation

The present study found no significant moderation effect on the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and motivation. This finding suggests that despite gender, the effect of laissez-faire on motivation stays approximately constant,

meaning it will reduce motivation in own work. A possible explanation for the significant main effect, but absence of moderation, could be explained by social exchange theory. With its emphasis on reciprocation or the felt obligation to reciprocate, social exchange theory can to a large extent explain why employees become motivated to exert effort on behalf of their organisation or leader (Kuvaas, Buch, Dysvik, & Haerem, 2012). However, because a laissez-faire leader is absent, he or she will not be able to reciprocate any of the efforts provided by the employees. This means that, despite men and women having motivational differences, none of them receive any appreciation for the work done or support in fulfilling their goals at the workplace. One could therefore argue that the social exchange relationship between the leader and employee is weakened which makes the employees feel less obliged to give back to the organisation (Buch, Kuvaas, Dysvik, & Schyns, 2014), i.e. they become less motivated at work.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study has several limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the final results. The first limitation is the cross-sectional research design, which precludes the drawing of a conclusion as to causality, nor to exclude the possibility of reverse causality. For example, it cannot be ruled out whether the employees experience role conflict, stress and decreased motivation because the leader is perceived to be laissez-faire, or that in principle, these factors lead to laissez-faire behaviours. Consequently, longitudinal or experimental studies in extensive samples are needed to come closer to causality inferences on the relationships examined in the present study. Furthermore, Skogstad et al. (2007) suggested that laissez-faire leadership accumulates over time, and that a better estimate of the correlations between laissez-faire leadership and the negative aspects of the psychosocial work environment will be observable first after 6 and 24 months. Therefore, future research should address this call and investigate the perception of laissez-faire leadership and its consequences over a longer period of time.

A second limitation of the study is the possibility of common method variance (Podsakoff, 2003). Common method variance can be a weakness in quantitative research, especially related to leadership topics as the method is insufficient in

measuring the interaction between a leader and an employee (Conger, 1998). The principal component analysis that was conducted resulted in three components with eigenvalues above 1, and explained variance of the factors ranging from 28.92% (component 1) to 11.021% (component 3). Despite the significant findings in this study, the amount of variance accounted for could arguably be modest, leaving much of the variance unexplained. However, Faragher et al. (2013) found in their meta-study, when investigating the relationship between leadership, work environment and employees health, that a correlation above 0.3 is rare. Further, given the modest correlation in this study, the strong criteria applied to determining item retention and the collinearity diagnostics, it is debatable whether there is a small chance of common method bias influencing the observed relationships in our study.

Thirdly, the construct of motivation was only measured on a single item. This led to the item motivation not being included in the principal component analysis. Single-item measurement is not preferable (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997) because they are presumed to have unacceptably low reliability. According to Kuvaas and Dysvik (2012), one should use at least three items in the measurement of psychological characteristics so that the breadth of a psychological phenomenon can be captured. Future research should thus address the construct of motivation and investigate it using a multiple-item scale to see if findings in this study is supported.

The fourth limitation of this study is the extent to which a leader is measured. The analysis of laissez-faire leadership in the survey measures all instances of leadership as a whole, which makes us unable to distinguish whether the leader is male, female, civilian or military. Dienesch and Liden (1986) argued in their research that individual characteristics, such as gender, can have an impact on the Leader-Member Exchange. Employees with the same gender as their leader was found to develop high-quality relationships with their leader, compared to employees of the opposite gender (Larwood & Blackmore, 1978; Wayne, Liden, & Sparrowe, 1994). In relation to destructive leadership, Pelletier (2012) found that out-group employees perceived their leader to be more toxic than members with favoured status. Hence, it would be interesting to investigate whether Leader-Member Exchange in the NAF would affect findings from the present

study. Thereby, future research should address such relationships to gain better insights in this matter.

It is important to keep in mind that the sample used in this study consisted of a rather homogenous group of mostly male. There is also a possibility that the population and sample in our study has had an impact on our findings, especially with regards to the significant moderation effects. The majority of employees within the NAF are men, which creates high demands on women's adaptability and robustness. By this, one will expect there to be higher thresholds for women to choose a career within the organisation. The majority of women that consider entering the NAF quit because they do not feel they have the physical abilities or because they are visible deviants from the conformational masculine ideals (Steder, 2013). This suggests that the women that actually choose to work in the NAF are especially resilient and independent. Thus, when challenges and problems occur in the organisation, these women might be more equipped to handle such situations. When a *laissez-faire* leader ignores his or her responsibility, this can to a larger extent affect the male employees as there is a greater variation among the men employed. Future research should therefore consider exploring this phenomenon, especially due to the compulsory military service for women introduced in 2015 (Forsvaret, 2016c). The results might be different when the gender balance of employees is more equal, and the composition of women employed is more varied.

Beyond conducting similar studies with a different sample, an interesting avenue for future research would be to investigate alternative moderators on the relationship between employees' perception of *laissez-faire* leadership and psychosocial factors at work. Given the practical significance of the study, there is a possibility that other moderators might have a stronger predictive relationship than gender had in the present study. Organisations are facing changes in the demographic composition in the workforce due to market trends and demographic realities (Riordan & Shore, 1997). Therefore, conceptions of other demographic variables could be included as moderators, since prior research suggests them to have an impact on how employees perceive their leader (Epitropaki & Martin, 1999). For instance, age could be an interesting demographic to investigate further as a moderator because it is found to increase the general skill level of individuals

(Goss & Paul, 1986). Older employees might be less reliant on a present leader, because they have more skills and work experience to lean on.

The moderating effect of personality on the relationship between employees' perception of the leader and psychosocial factors could also be investigated in future research. Research propose that the feeling of a role conflict is a function of differences in personality and role expectations (Getzels & Guba, 1954). In addition, personality has been linked to other factors at work, including job stress (Paterniti, Niedhammer, Lang, & Consoli, 2002), job satisfaction (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002), burnout (Alarcon, Eschleman, & Bowling, 2009), interpersonal conflict (Harvey, Blouin, & Stout, 2006) etc.

Finally, it needs to be further explored whether the findings regarding gender differences can be generalised to other organisations and countries beyond what is found in this study. The Norwegian Armed Forces have a greater proportion of male employees. Consequently, future research should look at the same topic in a different context and within other organisations with a majority of one gender (i.e. nursing, academia or construction) or an equal amount of each gender.

Practical implications

Despite its limitations, this study has important implications for practice. The main take away for organisations is that laissez-faire leadership is an undesirable form of leadership that negatively affects employees' experience of role conflict, stress and motivation, which finds support in this study. Furthermore, organisations should be aware that there might be gender differences in the way that male and female employees are affected by such form of destructive leadership. This study could therefore have implications on leadership practises.

First, the fact that laissez-faire is present within the NAF shows that leaders engaging in such form of leadership behaviours is not exceptional, given its prevalence in all types of organisations (Aasland et al., 2010). The appearance of such passive leadership does not seem to be restricted for civilian organisations only, but can also take place in military organisations where, initially, active leadership characterised by command and control is central. In this way, the study

contributes in giving a more nuanced understanding of the nature and effectiveness of different forms of leadership.

Furthermore, because *laissez-faire* is a passive form of destructive leadership, it can be harder to detect and intervene for employees, but also be more tolerated than some of the more active forms of destructive leadership (Skogstad et al., 2007). The findings in our study suggests that a *laissez-faire* leader is able to create similar damage to employees as other types of destructive leadership. Accordingly, on a practical level, one should educate and inform employees that *laissez-faire* leadership is also a reprehensible issue that must be reported. Providing sufficient and safe whistle blowing routines and procedures will thereby be of high importance. Employees should be familiarised with such procedures and be encouraged to report such behaviour (Krasikova et al., 2013). Especially with regards to male employees, considering the fact that they experience *laissez-faire* leadership as more difficult and because they have more difficulties in turning to others for help when experiencing problems at work (Tamres et al., 2002). Consequently, addressing *laissez-faire* leadership in leadership education and as general information may have a positive impact on the psychosocial work environment in the NAF.

Practitioners should also have in mind the sample in this study. There is a possibility that the gender differences found in the present study will naturally be reduced over the years, due to the compulsory military service for both genders (Forsvaret, 2016c). This indicates that the composition of women in the NAF will be more equal to the one of men, and there might also be more female leaders. Despite the fact that there might be less differences among men and women in their reactions to *laissez-faire* leadership in the future, the prevalence of such leadership might still be problematic. One possibility to diminish the effects of *laissez-faire* leadership is to focus on recruiting and promoting strong employees, who are able to stand up and challenge *laissez-faire* leaders (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). As suggested by Thoroughgood et al. (2012), careful pre-screening measures can be used to recognise candidates likely to be highly affected by such leadership. Furthermore, to ensure that existing employees takes control of the situation, organisations may benefit from implementing a long-term strategy of educating employees on how to confront stress and role conflict. Education helps

to understand and cope with unpleasant situations that make people vulnerable to the illusions of destructive leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2005a).

Conclusion

Although potential relationships between laissez-faire leadership and psychosocial factors at work have been proposed in literature, less research has been directed towards gender in order to see whether men and women are affected differently by such form of leadership. Therefore, the present study aimed to fulfill this research gap, by investigating the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and psychosocial factors at work. In line with existing research, laissez-faire leadership was found to have a negative impact on employees feelings of role conflict, stress, and motivation. Thus, this form of destructive leadership is not exceptional as it takes place in all types of organisations. However, the findings in the present study also suggests gender to have a moderating role on the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and role conflict, and laissez-faire leadership and stress. This provides grounds for suggesting that the relationships are not as universal as reseachers initially thought, since men and women could experience it differently. Recommendations for leadership practise suggests that providing sufficient and safe whistle blowing routines and procedures will be of high importance. Furthermore, organisations could overcome the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership by recruiting and promoting strong employees able to challenge bad leadership behaviours. Moreover, future research should further investigate gender and other demographic variables, in relation to laissez-faire leadership and other types of destructive leadership styles, to separate individuals and see how they are affected differently.

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Attachments

Appendix 1: Principal Component Analysis with Promax Rotation

Appendix 2: Preliminary Thesis Report