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**Three Essays on the Effects of Laissez-Faire Leadership on Employees'  
Job Attitudes and Psychological Well-Being**

par  
**Véronique Robert**

Thèse présentée en vue de l'obtention du grade de Ph. D. en administration  
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Cette thèse intitulée :

**Three Essays on the Effects of Laissez-Faire Leadership on Employees'  
Job Attitudes and Psychological Well-Being**

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## Résumé

Cette thèse contient trois articles portant sur le leadership laissez-faire, un style de leadership qui représente l'absence d'interactions entre les supérieurs et leurs employés. Concrètement, les supérieurs pratiquant le laissez-faire évitent de prendre des décisions, abdiquent leurs responsabilités et n'exercent pas leur autorité. Bien que les effets néfastes du leadership laissez-faire soient bien documentés, la recherche sur les mécanismes sous-jacents et les conditions de ces effets demeure rare. Dès lors, le but de cette thèse est d'évaluer les mécanismes sous-jacents et les conditions des effets du leadership laissez-faire sur les attitudes au travail et le bien-être psychologique des travailleurs.

Le premier article utilise le cadre d'orientation identitaire et la théorie des échanges sociaux pour expliquer que les employés ayant un concept de soi relationnel élevé sont plus susceptibles d'être affectés par le leadership laissez-faire. Puisque ces employés se définissent par leurs relations dyadiques, ils sont plus portés à réagir négativement au leadership laissez-faire. Dès lors, leur relation avec le superviseur, plus particulièrement leur contribution aux objectifs mutuels, et leur engagement affectif envers l'organisation s'en voient par la suite négativement impactés. Ces prédictions sont testées avec une étude en trois temps et des analyses de modélisation par équations structurelles sur un échantillon d'employés provenant de diverses organisations ( $N = 449$ ). Tel qu'anticipé, les employés ayant un concept de soi relationnel élevé sont les plus affectés par le leadership laissez-faire, ce qui impacte négativement la dimension de contribution des échanges superviseur-employé et induit un effet négatif indirect plus fort sur l'engagement organisationnel affectif.

Le deuxième article évalue à l'aide de deux études l'effet du leadership laissez-faire sur le bien-être psychologique des employés en s'intéressant à la fois à ses aspects positifs et négatifs. Puisque ce style de leadership représente l'absence de décisions de la part du superviseur, nous démontrons que ce style de leadership négatif entraîne une diminution de la santé mentale positive et une augmentation des symptômes dépressifs à court terme et à long terme. De plus, comme les superviseurs sont des agents importants de l'organisation, plus les employés perçoivent que leur superviseur a un statut

organisationnel élevé, plus l'impact du leadership laissez-faire sur leur bien-être psychologique est élevé. Les résultats de l'étude 1 démontrent avec une étude en trois temps ( $N = 608$ ) que le leadership laissez-faire a un effet négatif sur la santé mentale positive et un effet positif sur le développement de symptômes dépressifs à court et à long terme. Ils démontrent également que le statut organisationnel perçu du superviseur amplifie certains de ces effets. L'étude 2 ( $N = 190$ ) démontre à l'aide d'un design expérimental que les effets du leadership laissez-faire sur les aspects positifs et négatifs du bien-être psychologique sont distincts de ceux exercés par des formes actives de leadership, tel que le leadership constructif et la supervision abusive.

Enfin, le troisième article étudie les effets du leadership laissez-faire sur le roulement des employés. Selon la théorie de l'identité sociale, les individus développent une identité organisationnelle en fonction de la valeur qu'ils associent au fait qu'ils sont membres de l'organisation. En tant qu'agent de liaison entre les employés et l'organisation, quand les leaders laissez-faire négligent et ignorent leurs employés, ils peuvent nuire à l'adoption de l'identité organisationnelle des employés, et ainsi menacer cette identité. Dès lors, le concept de menace identitaire organisationnelle est introduit pour expliquer comment le leadership laissez-faire diminue l'attachement psychologique (c.-à-d., l'engagement organisationnel affectif) des employés à l'organisation, augmente le détachement psychologique (c.-à-d., les intentions de quitter) et mène aux départs volontaires des employés. Ces prédictions sont testées avec deux études avec trois temps de mesures. L'étude 1 ( $N = 757$ ) démontre que la menace identitaire organisationnelle agit en tant que médiateur dans les relations du leadership laissez-faire avec l'engagement affectif et les intentions de quitter. L'étude 2 ( $N = 731$ ) reproduit ces résultats tout en contrôlant pour les effets de l'isolement au travail et démontre également l'effet indirect positif du leadership laissez-faire sur les départs volontaires des employés à travers la menace identitaire organisationnelle.

**Mots clés :** leadership laissez-faire : échanges superviseur-employé : engagement organisationnel affectif : concept de soi relationnel : cadre d'orientation identitaire : théorie de l'échange sociale : bien-être psychologique : symptômes dépressifs : statut

organisationnel perçus du superviseur ; menace à l'identité organisationnelle ; théorie de l'identité sociale ; rétention ; intentions de quitter ; départs volontaires

**Méthodes de recherche :** méthodes quantitatives ; étude longitudinale ; modélisation par équations structurelles ; étude expérimentale





## Abstract

This doctoral dissertation contains three essays focusing on laissez-faire leadership, a leadership style that represents the absence of transactions between leaders and employees. Concretely, laissez-faire leaders avoid making decisions, abdicate their responsibilities, and do not use their authority. Although the detrimental effects of laissez-faire leadership are well documented, research on the underlying mechanisms and the boundary conditions associated with these effects remains scarce. As such, the purpose of the dissertation is to evaluate the underlying mechanisms and the boundary conditions associated with the effects of laissez-faire leadership on employees' job attitudes and psychological well-being.

The first essay uses the identity orientation framework and social exchange theory to propose that employees with stronger relational self-concepts are more likely to be affected by laissez-faire leadership. As these employees define themselves through dyadic relationships, they may react more negatively to laissez-faire leadership, hindering their relationship with their leader, more specifically their contributions to mutual goals. This may subsequently reduce their affective organizational commitment. These predictions are tested within a three-wave time-lagged design with structural equations modeling analyses on a sample of employees from multiple organizations ( $N = 449$ ). As predicted, the relational self-concept was associated with a stronger negative effect of laissez-faire leadership on the contribution dimension of leader-member exchange and a stronger negative indirect effect on affective organizational commitment.

The second essay used two studies to examine the impact of laissez-faire leadership on employee psychological well-being by focusing on both positive and negative aspects of well-being. As laissez-faire leadership reflects the absence of leadership, we expected it to reduce positive mental health and enhance depressive symptoms among employees over time. Additionally, as supervisors are agents of the organization, we predicted that the more employees perceived their supervisor to hold a high organizational status, the stronger the impact of laissez-faire leadership on their psychological well-being. Using a three-wave time-lagged design, Study 1 ( $N = 608$ )

found laissez-faire leadership to exert a negative effect on positive well-being and a positive effect on employee depressive symptoms, and obtained some support for the moderating effect of perceived supervisor organizational status. Study 2 ( $N = 190$ ) used an experimental design to demonstrate that the effects of laissez-faire leadership on positive and negative well-being are distinct from those of active forms of leadership (i.e., constructive leadership and abusive supervision).

Lastly, the third essay examines the effects of laissez-faire leadership on employee turnover. According to social identity theory, individuals develop an organizational identity that relates to the value and meaning of their membership in the organization. As agents of liaison between employees and the organization, leaders who engage in laissez-faire behaviors such as neglecting and avoiding interactions with employees may harm the value and meaning of employees' organizational identity, and as such threaten their identity. We introduce the concept of organizational identity threat to explain how laissez-faire leadership reduces employees' psychological attachment (i.e., affective organizational commitment) to the organization, amplifies their psychological detachment (i.e., turnover intentions), and leads to voluntary turnover. These predictions were tested in two studies using three-wave time-lagged designs. Study 1 ( $N = 757$ ) found that organizational identity threat mediated the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and turnover intentions and affective organizational commitment. Study 2 ( $N = 731$ ) replicated these results, while controlling for the effect of workplace isolation. Moreover, laissez-faire leadership was found to have a positive indirect effect on employee turnover through organizational identity threat.

**Keywords:** laissez-faire leadership; leader-member exchange; affective organizational commitment; relational self-concept; identity orientation framework; social exchange theory; psychological well-being; depressive symptoms; perceived supervisor organizational status; organizational identity threat; social identity theory; retention; turnover intentions; actual voluntary turnover

**Research methods:** quantitative methods; time-lagged research; structural equation modeling; experimental design

# Table of Contents

<b>Résumé</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>xiii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>xiii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>xix</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Laissez-Faire Leadership and Affective Commitment: the Roles of Leader-Member Exchange and Subordinate Relational Self-concept</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Abstract .....	9
1.1 Introduction .....	10
1.2 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses .....	13
1.3 Method .....	20
1.4 Results .....	23
1.5 Discussion .....	28
1.6 Conclusion .....	34
Footnotes .....	35
References .....	36
Tables and figures .....	53
<b>Chapter 2 Laissez-Faire Leadership and Employee Well-Being: The Contribution of Perceived Supervisor Organizational Status</b> .....	<b>59</b>
Abstract .....	59
2.1 Introduction .....	60
2.2 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses .....	62
2.3 Study 1 .....	71
2.4 Study 1: Results .....	74
2.5 Study 1: Discussion .....	78
2.6 Study 2 .....	78
2.7 Study 2: Results .....	81
2.8 Study 2: Discussion .....	81
2.9 General Discussion .....	82
2.10 Conclusion .....	88
References .....	90
Tables and figures .....	107

<b>Chapter 3 Laissez-faire Leadership and Turnover: The Role of Employee's</b>	
<b>Organizational Identity Threat .....</b>	<b>111</b>
Abstract .....	111
3.1 Introduction .....	112
3.2 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses .....	114
3.3 A Pilot Study of the Organizational Identity Threat Scale .....	118
3.4 Study 1 .....	120
3.5 Study 1: Results .....	122
3.6 Study 1: Discussion .....	124
3.7 Study 2 .....	124
3.8 Study 2: Results .....	127
3.9 General Discussion .....	129
3.10 Conclusion .....	134
References .....	135
Tables and figures .....	148
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>163</b>

## List of Tables

### Chapter 1

<b>Table 1.</b> Fit indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models .....	53
<b>Table 2.</b> Tests of Measurement Invariance across Time .....	54
<b>Table 3.</b> Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Study Variables .....	55
<b>Table 4.</b> Path Analysis Results for the Moderation and Moderated Mediation Models	56

### Chapter 2

<b>Table 1.</b> Study 1: Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models.....	105
<b>Table 2.</b> Study 1: Tests of Measurement Invariance across Time for Employee Depressive Symptoms.....	106
<b>Table 3.</b> Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables.....	107
<b>Table 4.</b> Study 1: Fit Indices for Latent Moderated Structural Equation Models .....	108
<b>Table 5.</b> Study 1: Path Analysis Results for the Moderated Models.....	109

### Chapter 3

<b>Table 1.</b> Pilot Study: Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models Comparing Org. Identity Threat and Related Constructs .....	148
<b>Table 2.</b> Study 1: Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models.....	149
<b>Table 3.</b> Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Study Variables.....	150
<b>Table 4.</b> Study 2: Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models.....	151
<b>Table 5.</b> Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Study Variables.....	152



## List of Figures

### Chapter 1

**Figure 1.** Interaction between laissez-faire leadership and relational self-concept (RSC) predicting LMX-Contribution. .... 57

**Figure 2.** Standardized parameter estimates for the moderated mediation model. .... 58

### Chapter 2

**Figure 1.** Study 1 interaction between laissez-faire leadership and perceived supervisor organizational status predicting positive mental health..... 110

### Chapter 3

**Figure 1.** Theoretical models for Study 1 and Study 2..... 154





*To those who know...*

*"It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves."*

*- Sir Edmund Hillary*



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## Introduction

Initially introduced by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939), laissez-faire leadership is conceptualized as a style of leadership where leaders avoid and abdicate their organizational responsibilities (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad, Hetland et al., 2014). While the leader has been appointed to and still physically occupies the leadership position, in practice the laissez-faire leader has shirked the responsibilities and duties assigned to him or her (Lewin, et al., 1939). As representative of the organization (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997) acting as liaison between employees and the organization (Seers & Graen, 1984), the leader exerts a vast and multifaceted role. Thus, it is not surprising that the absence of leadership was “consistently found to be the least satisfying and least effective management style” (Bass & Bass, 2008, p.145). Research has indeed found that laissez-faire leadership has negative consequences for both employees and organizations (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b; Skogstad et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2017).

Despite this evidence, research on laissez-faire leadership has been limited so far (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014). This is highly concerning and problematic because laissez-faire leadership is one of the most prevalent forms of negative leadership (Aasland et al., 2010). This may be explained by the fact that leadership research has mainly focused on active and constructive forms of leadership. As such, research on negative forms of leadership remains relatively scarce (Tepper, 2000, 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Among these leadership styles, passive forms, such as laissez-faire leadership, have received the least attention (Che et al., 2017; Skogstad, Hetland et al., 2014). Thus, existing research on laissez-faire leadership is relatively nascent and there is still a lack of theorizing and hypotheses testing (Bass & Bass, 2008; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b; Skogstad, Hetland et al., 2014).

This doctoral dissertation seeks to further investigate and understand the mechanisms and the contextual boundaries of laissez-faire leadership’s detrimental effects on employees’ job attitudes and psychological well-being. The first essay focuses on the effect of laissez-faire leadership on affective organizational commitment. It further

considers the roles that leader-member exchange and subordinate relational self-concept play in that relationship. More precisely, we examine how laissez-faire leaders can damage the relationship with their subordinates, which can ultimately influence subordinates' affective commitment to the organization. We theorize that this is particularly true when employees define themselves through dyadic relationships, hence have strong relational needs, which are unmet by their laissez-faire leaders.

The second essay focuses on the effects of laissez-faire leadership on employee psychological well-being. We posit that laissez-faire leaders hinder subordinates' positive mental health and contribute to the development of depressive symptoms over time. We also demonstrate that these effects are stronger when employees perceive that their supervisor has a high organizational status and that these effects differ from those of active forms of leadership (i.e., constructive leadership and abusive supervision).

The third essay examines the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and employee turnover. Building on social identity theory, we introduce the concept of organizational identity threat as a mechanism explaining why laissez-faire leadership may lead to reduced affective commitment, enhanced turnover intentions, and increased likelihood of voluntary turnover.

The rest of the dissertation is as follows. First, the theoretical framework is introduced. The concept of laissez-faire leadership is defined in relation to potentially similar constructs and the state of research on this leadership style in different leadership models is presented. The following chapters present three essays examining the effects of laissez-faire leadership on employees' job attitudes and psychological well-being. The three essays are followed by concluding remarks summarizing the main contributions of the dissertation and providing some directions for future research on laissez-faire leadership.



## Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework, the concept of laissez-faire leadership is presented and distinguished from other potentially similar constructs. Moreover, I also describe how it has been conceptualized and studied in the *Full Range of Leadership Model* and in the destructive leadership literature. This provides an overview of the state of research on laissez-faire leadership.

### *Definition*

Since the goal of leadership is to influence others (Yukl, 2010), when leaders do not make decisions or use their authority to influence their employees (Bass 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1994, 1997), they essentially abdicate their responsibilities as leaders (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014). This style of leadership is conceptualized as laissez-faire leadership. Laissez-faire leaders are neither present nor responsive when their employees need their input or their assistance (Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014). These leaders lack communication, do not provide feedback, and present a general indifference to employee performance (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a). They leave too much responsibility to subordinates, set no clear goals, and do not make decisions to help their group (Stogdill & Bass, 1981). Thus, laissez-faire leaders do not assume the responsibilities associated with their role as a leader. However, a leader is still appointed to and is still physically occupying a leadership position (Lewin et al., 1939), which leaves the social expectations associated with the role of leader unfulfilled (Stryker & Burke, 2000). This is why laissez-faire leadership is defined as “not meeting the legitimate expectations of the subordinates” (Skogstad et al., 2007, p. 81).

It is sometimes referred to as avoidant leadership (see Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014), as non-leadership, as non-strategic leadership (see Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a, 2008b), as the absence of leadership (see Bass & Avolio, 1990) or as zero leadership (see Skogstad et al., 2007). Nonetheless, this absence of leadership is “as important as the presence of other forms of leadership” (Judge & Piccolo, 2004, p. 765)

and authors (e.g., Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Piccolo et al., 2012; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014) argue that it constitutes a unique form of leadership that should be studied in its own right.

Researchers (e.g., Lewin, 1944) on laissez-faire leadership pointed that conceptually, this leadership style could be similar to more positive forms of leadership, such as delegation, empowerment, or autonomy, because it offers a high degree of freedom and discretion to employees. While the distinction may not always be clear for practitioners, researchers emphasized that there are clear differences with these alternative forms of leadership. For instance, according to Bass (1998), “empowering leadership means providing autonomy to one’s followers [while] on the other hand laissez-faire leadership means that the autonomy of one’s followers is obtained by default” (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 138). In its positive form, the non-involvement of the leaders involves an active choice to delegate to the employee with the intention to develop the employee’s competencies and to follow up afterwards (Antonakis, et al., 2003; Bass & Bass, 2008). However, laissez-faire leaders do not provide the effective conditions for employees to carry out their jobs; instead these employees feel uncertain about their work and responsibilities (Bass & Bass, 2008). In these situations, employees need input, guidance, or follow-up, which are not being provided by their leaders. As such, laissez-faire leadership could be considered a situational absence of leadership, where leaders are not present when their employees need them (Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014).

### ***Full Range of Leadership Model***

Influenced by the work of Burns (1978), Bass (1985) introduced the *Full Range Leadership (FRL) Model*, which includes transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. While the FRL model focuses on three leadership styles, it includes a total of nine dimensions (Antonakis et al., 2003). Transformational leadership, which corresponds to proactive and charismatic leaders who inspire employees to work towards a collective interest, includes five dimensions: attributed idealized influence (i.e., socialized charisma of a leader perceived as confident and powerful), idealized influence behavior (i.e., charismatic actions centered on values and a sense of mission), inspirational

motivation (i.e., ways to energize followers with optimism, ambitious and vision), intellectual stimulation (i.e., appealing to followers' sense of logic and analysis), and individualized consideration (i.e., a focus on employees' individual needs and helping in their self-actualization). Transactional leadership refers to the fulfillment of the exchange relationships involved in the contractual obligations and the monitoring and control of outcomes. This style involves three dimensions: contingent reward leadership (i.e., constructive transactions), management-by-exception active (i.e., active corrective transactions), and management-by-exception passive (i.e., passive corrective transactions) (Antonakis et al., 2003). The final component is laissez-faire leadership, which is defined as a form of non-transactional leadership.

Laissez-faire leadership contrasts with the two active forms of leadership in the FRL model, transformational and transactional leadership (Den Hartog et al., 1997), because it does not require any activity (Stogdill & Bass, 1981). The FRL model places these leadership styles on an activity continuum from passive to active (Bass & Avolio, 1994) with transformational leadership being the most active form and laissez-faire leadership being the absence of transactions (Antonakis et al., 2003) and most passive form (Bass & Bass, 2008; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a). According to the model, the highest level of leadership activity (i.e., transformational leadership) has the most beneficial results because it enables leaders to satisfy the higher order needs of their followers and to fully engage them (Burns, 1978). This means that laissez-faire leadership, the most inactive form of leadership, is by definition the most ineffective form in the model (Bass, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Indeed, if the goal of leadership is to influence followers (Yukl, 2010), then inactivity is unlikely to lead to effective leadership. This is the reason why Bass and Avolio (1999) argue that the ideal leader should engage in few laissez-faire behaviors.

Despite being part of one of the most well-known and widely used models of leadership (Den Hartog et al., 1997), laissez-faire leadership remains understudied, underdeveloped, and the least investigated type of leadership, especially compared to the other styles of the FRL model (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Dumdum et al., 2002; Lowe et al., 1996; Yammarino et al., 1993). One of the reasons why laissez-faire leadership has

been relatively less studied may be that the literature on leadership has traditionally focused on good practices, neglecting leadership with negative consequences (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Indeed, articles focusing on the FRL model often fail to consider laissez-faire leadership, prioritizing transformation and transactional leadership. For example, in their meta-analysis of the FRL model, Judge and Piccolo (2004) reported that only 24 out of their 81 articles studied laissez-faire leadership. In the 14 published studies testing the factor structure of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (i.e., the scale measuring the FRL model) considered by Antonakis et al. (2003), only half (i.e., Yammarino et al., 1993; Druskat, 1994; Koh, et al., 1995; Den Hartog et al., 1997; Geyer & Steyer, 1998; Avolio et al., 1999; Tejada et al., 2001) included laissez-faire leadership, and three of these articles examined its structure in association with a dimension of transactional leadership, passive management-by-exception. Indeed, some researchers have pointed out that the nine dimensions may fall into higher order two factors, i.e., active vs. passive leadership (Avolio et al., 1999). The combination of laissez-faire leadership and the passive management-by-exception dimension of transactional leadership has often been made by researchers to represent passive leadership or passive-avoidant leadership (e.g., Chênevert et al., 2013; Harold. & Holtz, 2015). However, while laissez-faire leadership and passive management-by-exception are generally highly correlated due to their common passive nature (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a), they are not conceptually equivalent (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) and remain different constructs (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b). More concretely, passive management-by-exception implies that leaders react to employees when they do not execute their work properly or when mistakes have already been made (Antonakis et al., 2003). Therefore, these leaders are active and intervene only when problems arise and have become serious (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a, 2008b). In comparison, the only aspect that may be considered active among laissez-faire leaders is that he or she has “chosen” not to take action (Antonakis et al., 2003) because laissez-faire leaders lack responses to situations, even when these situations warrant attention (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b). Consequently, there is evidence supporting the nine-factor model and the usefulness of retaining a more differentiated leadership model (Antonakis et al., 2003). Focusing specifically on laissez-

faire leadership allows to truly focus on the effects of non-leadership and the uniqueness of a total absence of leadership (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b).

While research on the FRL model has long considered laissez-faire leadership as a detrimental leadership style with numerous findings supporting its negative effects on various outcomes, such as performance (Yammarino et al., 1993), leader effectiveness, and satisfaction with the leader (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), this research is mostly limited to direct effects (Bass & Bass, 2008). Thus, much remains to be known on examining *why* and *when* the effects of laissez-faire leadership occur. As laissez-faire leadership can be distinguished from other leadership styles in the FRL model by its inactive nature and its negative consequences, it warrants being more specifically and thoroughly investigated.

### ***Destructive Leadership Models***

Due to its negative effects, laissez-faire leadership is described by many authors as a form of destructive leadership. For instance, considering both destructive and constructive forms of leadership, Aasland et al. (2010) and Einarsen et al. (2007) included laissez-faire leadership in their models as a form of destructive leadership. While laissez-faire leaders are not actively destructive like abusive supervisors (Schyns & Schilling, 2013), authors (e.g., Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad et al., 2007; Skogstad, Hetland et al., 2014) argue that due to the neglect of responsibilities towards subordinates, the systematic absence of positive behavior by laissez-faire leaders violates the interests of the organization (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad et al., 2007) and undermines subordinates' motivation and well-being (Einarsen et al., 2007). Thus, laissez-faire leadership is considered as a form of destructive leadership because it harms both the organization as a whole and the members of the organization (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad et al., 2007). This is why researchers maintain that poor leadership can be passive (Kelloway et al., 2005). Consequently, even if laissez-faire leadership is passive or inactive, it can be considered destructive due to its negative effects (Skogstad, et al., 2007). This line of research has found that laissez-faire leadership is associated with more role conflict, role ambiguity, employee conflicts, and bullying (Skogstad et al.,

2007), and lower satisfaction with the leader, leader effectiveness, role clarity, and performance (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a).

As findings show that laissez-faire leadership is one of the most prevalent form of destructive leadership (Aasland et al., 2010), organizational research would gain from investigating it comprehensively given its unique inactive nature and fundamental importance for employees. Moreover, compared to more active forms of destructive leadership, laissez-faire leadership may not be motivated or intentional (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a). Therefore, these leaders may be more susceptible to change and to develop more constructive practices through training and coaching. As such, practitioners may greatly benefit from insights on the detrimental effects of laissez-faire leadership and the ways to limit these effects.

# Chapter 1

## **Laissez-Faire Leadership and Affective Commitment: the Roles of Leader-Member Exchange and Subordinate Relational Self-concept**

### **Abstract**

Although the detrimental effects of laissez-faire leadership are well documented, research on the underlying mechanisms and the boundary conditions associated with these effects remains scarce. Using the identity orientation framework and social exchange theory, we propose that employees with stronger relational self-concepts are more likely to be affected by laissez-faire leadership. As these employees define themselves through dyadic relationships, they may react more negatively to laissez-faire leadership by diminishing their contributions to mutual goals and reducing their affective organizational commitment. These predictions were tested within a three-wave longitudinal study through structural equations modeling analyses with full information maximum likelihood estimation on a sample of employees from multiple organizations ( $N = 449$ ). As predicted, the relational self-concept was associated with a stronger negative effect of laissez-faire leadership on the contribution dimension of leader-member exchange and a stronger negative indirect effect on affective organizational commitment. The implications of these findings for our understanding of the mechanisms related to laissez-faire leadership are discussed.

**Keywords:** Laissez-faire leadership; Leader-member exchange; Affective organizational commitment; Relational self-concept; Identity orientation framework; Social exchange theory.

## 1.1 Introduction

Leadership has always been at the forefront of organizational research. Most research has focused on what constitutes a good leader, neglecting negative forms of leadership (Tepper, 2000, 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). However, according to the principle that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), negative forms of leadership may be more influential than positive forms of leadership. It is thus surprising that this area of research has been underinvestigated (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Despite recent interest into destructive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013), more passive yet destructive forms of leadership such as laissez-faire leadership did not receive the same attention (Che, Zhou, Kessler, & Spector, 2017). Passive forms of leadership, which include laissez-faire as the most extreme passivity of leaders, can still have detrimental effects on employees and organizations (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Kelloway, Sivanathan, Francis, & Barling, 2005; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). For example, laissez-faire leadership was found to be associated with reduced job satisfaction, leader effectiveness, satisfaction with the leader (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), and performance (Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993). Similarly, a study (Skogstad et al., 2014) found laissez-faire leadership to be the sole (negative) leadership predictor of job satisfaction over a 2-year period. However, despite being one of the most prevalent forms of negative leadership in modern organizations (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010), laissez-faire leadership has been understudied (Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2014). Organizational research would gain from investigating this particular type of (negative) leadership given both its prevalence and its likely detrimental effects on employees and organizations.

Laissez-faire leadership is part of the full-range leadership model (Avolio, 2011), one of the most established (Den Hartog, Van Muijen, & Koopman, 1997) and popular models of leadership (Dumdum, Lowe, & Avolio, 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996), which also comprises transformational and transactional dimensions. Defined as avoidance and abdication of one’s responsibilities (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014), “laissez-faire has been



consistently found to be the least satisfying and least effective management style” (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 145). However, as research has mainly focused on the direct effects of laissez-faire leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a), the mechanisms and contextual boundaries associated with these effects have received little attention, which is a gap we intend to fill with the current study. Our attempt at doing so resonates with the call for a more nuanced approach to laissez-faire leadership (Wong & Giessner, 2018), as its effects may depend on the context (Yang, 2015; Yang & Li, 2017). By shedding light on these processes, we take a step toward understanding how the detrimental effects of laissez-faire leadership can be reduced, hence providing clues for practitioners.

First, laissez-faire leadership may differentially affect individuals depending on their individual dispositions. An important individual disposition that has been considered in prior leadership research is the self-concept (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). The self-concept refers to the ways in which people define themselves and, as such, influences the perceptions of oneself and others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lord & Brown, 2004; Markus & Wurf, 1987). It is composed of distinct motivations, sources of self-worth, and self-knowledge (Brickson, 2000). Multiple levels of the self-concept have been identified, namely, the individual, relational, and collective levels (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lord & Brown, 2004). Since leadership involves dyadic relationships between leaders and subordinates, a relational self-concept, which refers to the significance of dyadic relationships in people’s life (Johnson & Saboe, 2011), is a salient characteristic that may influence employee reactions to leaders (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Employees with a strong relational self-concept are likely more affected by, and to react more strongly to, laissez-faire leadership because such leadership poses a threat to their goals, needs, and identity-defining relationship (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). The absence of decisions and interactions with the leader may violate their expectations that a leader should attend to work-related problems and their relational needs (Lord & Brown, 2001). Therefore, individuals with strong relational self-concepts may experience laissez-faire leadership as disappointing, resulting in negative attitudes toward their supervisors and the organization.

Second, we explore the possibility that laissez-faire leadership may negatively affect the quality of the exchange relationship between employees and leaders. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory suggests that leaders develop differential relationships with employees, ranging from low-quality to high-quality relationships (Boies & Howell, 2006; Chen, He, & Weng, 2018; Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Liden & Graen, 1980). As laissez-faire leadership involves the abdication of one's responsibilities, it may result in reduced LMX, particularly among employees with strong relational self-concepts. As these individuals are more sensitive to expressions of support and recognition and the active involvement of their leaders in decisions (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), laissez-faire leaders—because they do not attend to employees' relational needs—will not be able to entice them to cooperate and contribute to mutual goals (De Cremer, 2003). Among the dimensions of LMX (i.e., affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect; Liden & Maslyn, 1998), one particularly reflects that “currency of exchange” (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Greguras & Ford, 2006; Law, Wang, & Hui, 2010; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001) we allude to here. Specifically, the contribution dimension of LMX (i.e., the activity put forth toward mutual goals; Liden & Maslyn, 1998) is most likely to be affected because laissez-faire leadership involves a failure to invest in the relationship with the employee. Thus, as a result of laissez-faire leadership, employees with strong relational self-concepts may be inclined to reduce their contributions to mutual goals. We further argue that a lack of contribution by these employees will in turn lead to reduced affective organizational commitment (AOC) because it is well established that relationships with supervisors have implications for attitudes toward the organization (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012).

This study contributes to the leadership literature in several ways. First, we extend this literature by delving into the mechanisms and boundary conditions explaining how laissez-faire leadership negatively relates to AOC. Our focus is on examining the quality of the relationship between employees and leaders (i.e., LMX) as a primary reason why laissez-faire may affect AOC. Second, in doing so, we take a disaggregated approach to LMX and identify its contribution dimension as the most relevant aspect of LMX that should be affected by laissez-faire leadership. To further demonstrate the unique sensitivity of LMX's contribution dimension to laissez-faire leadership, this study shows

in parallel that the other LMX dimensions (i.e., affect, loyalty, and professional respect) are not affected by laissez-faire leadership. Third, we examine employees' relational self-concepts as a boundary condition and, as such, depart from the leader-centric approaches that dominate the field (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). The relational self-concept is used as an individual difference variable that magnifies the value that individuals attribute to dyadic relationships. Fourth, our focus on laissez-faire leadership as an antecedent to LMX and AOC breaks new ground by expanding the spectrum of negative antecedents to these constructs. Finally, our hypotheses were tested within a dynamic perspective as we controlled for the baseline levels of our mediator and outcome variables in a three-wave longitudinal study. Hypotheses are developed in the next sections.

## **1.2 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

### ***Laissez-Faire Leadership***

Laissez-faire leadership is characterized by avoidance and inaction (Bass & Bass, 2008; Avolio, 2011; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014). Laissez-faire leaders avoid making decisions, abdicate their responsibilities, delay actions, and refrain from using the authority associated with their roles (Bass & Bass, 2008; Den Hartog et al., 1997). They also fail to provide feedback and recognition to subordinates (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b) and they tend to ignore followers' needs, as they do not deal with work-related problems (Yukl, 2010). These leaders do not take sides in disputes and are disorganized in dealing with priorities (Bass, 1998). Based on their survey, Aasland et al. (2010) noted that 21% of employees had experienced laissez-faire behaviors from their leaders during the previous six months, making laissez-faire one of the most prevalent form of negative leadership.

Neglecting one's responsibilities as a leader harms both the organization and the subordinates (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad et al., 2007). Laissez-faire leadership is not only ineffective but also destructive (Aasland et al., 2010; Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Skogstad, Aasland, et al., 2014; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014). Empirically, laissez-faire leadership has been found to be associated with reduced

subordinate effort (Bass & Stogdill, 1990), performance (Yammarino et al., 1993), job satisfaction, perceived leader effectiveness, and satisfaction with the leader (Judge & Piccolo, 2004); increased stress and interpersonal conflicts (Skogstad et al., 2007); and more role ambiguity and role conflict (Skogstad et al., 2007; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014). However, the inactivity characterizing laissez-faire leadership makes this style of leadership unique and distinct from other forms of negative leadership because its negative consequences result from the absence of constructive behaviors rather than from the presence of destructive ones (Kelloway, Mullen, & Francis, 2006). Therefore, further inquiry into laissez-faire leadership is warranted.

### ***Laissez-Faire Leadership and Leader-Member Exchange***

We posit that a primary mechanism through which laissez-faire leadership may affect employees pertains to the quality of the exchange relationship with the leader or LMX (e.g., Buch, Martinsen, & Kuvaas, 2015). Indeed, employees may be unmotivated to uphold a good relationship with a leader with whom they expect to have limited interactions (van Knippenberg & Steensma, 2003). According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), employees invest in a relationship when they feel that contributing their time and energy may lead to reciprocal exchanges. However, laissez-faire leaders fail to provide resources such as information, challenging task assignments, and autonomy-supportive conditions. In such circumstances, employees may feel they are not receiving their due in the relationship with their leader, which may reduce their desire to engage in tasks and duties beyond what is formally required.

The exchange of resources and opportunities is central to LMX development (Liden & Graen, 1980) and depending on the resources/opportunities that are valued by the exchange partners (Graen & Cashman, 1975), different “currencies of exchange” may be salient to LMX (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Law et al., 2010). Liden and Maslyn (1998) (see also Dienesch & Liden, 1986) developed a conceptualization of LMX comprising four dimensions reflecting different aspects of these currencies: affect (i.e., mutual affection based on interpersonal attraction), loyalty (i.e., the expression of public support for the goals and the other member’s character), contribution (i.e., the amount, direction

and quality of work toward mutual goals), and professional respect (i.e., the perception of reputation and excellence). While many studies have adopted a unidimensional view of LMX (Dulebohn, Wu, & Liao, 2017), it is likely that high LMX is derived from different dimensions depending on circumstances (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001), such as the leadership style adopted (Lee, 2005). Thus, the very nature of laissez-faire leadership may indicate which dimension of LMX is more likely to be solicited.

As laissez-faire leadership involves unfulfilled responsibilities, these leaders set standards that lower the value of work-related exchanges (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Therefore, the task-related behaviors of employees (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2005) and employees' own efforts to develop LMX (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001) may be limited. With laissez-faire leadership, the contribution dimension of LMX, which refers to the "perception of the amount, direction, and quality of work-oriented activity each member puts forth toward the mutual goals (explicit or implicit) of the dyad" (Dienesch & Liden, 1986, p. 624), is likely affected (e.g., Lee, 2005). From the employee's perspective, LMX's contribution reflects the subordinate's willingness to help the leader and contribute to his or her goals. Following social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), laissez-faire leaders do not encourage subordinates to contribute to mutual goals over what is included in their job descriptions as they may think they do not receive their dues (e.g., support, recognition) in the relationship with the leader. It is also likely that LMX's contribution dimension is mostly affected in response to laissez-faire leadership because it is the only dimension that reflects the exchange from a behavioral perspective. The other dimensions (affect, loyalty, and respect) do not refer to the behavioral component of the exchange relationship. Laissez-faire leaders echo to this dimension by not taking actions that would signal support and recognition to subordinates. It is thus the absence of constructive behaviors (Kelloway et al., 2006) in laissez-faire leaders that makes LMX's contribution mostly affected.

However, as theory has stipulated that because of limited resources and time, leaders differentiate among followers (Dansereau Jr., Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Liden & Graen, 1980; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2005), distinct LMX relationships are found across followers (Boies & Howell, 2006;

Chen et al., 2018; Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Henderson, Liden, Glibkowski, & Chaudhry, 2009; Herdman, Yang, & Arthur, 2017; Le Blanc & González-Romá, 2012; Liden, Erdogan, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2006; Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). Thus, while laissez-faire leadership may lend itself to poor LMX relationships, particularly in regard to its contribution dimension, there may be variability in the extent to which employees' relationships with their leaders are impacted by laissez-faire leadership. One factor that may explain this variability relates to employees' self-concepts (Jackson & Johnson, 2012), which we now discuss.

### *Levels of the Self-concept*

Leadership practices do not operate in a vacuum (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2017). Rather, leaders' behavior interacts with the characteristics of followers (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Such interactionist perspective suggests that a better understanding of leaders' influence can be gained by accounting for followers' expectations about leaders' behavior. To illustrate such individual differences, research has identified the self-concept as an important background construct that guides individuals' reactions to leaders' behavior (Lord et al., 1999). The self-concept is a self-regulatory mechanism that drives self-esteem and organizes self-relevant knowledge (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). As a chronic representation of identity that promotes a self-definition anchored at the individual, relational, or collective level, the self-concept influences how people feel, think, and behave (Lord & Brown, 2004; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Research has shown that the levels of the self-concept influence employees' interpretations of leaders' behavior (Chang & Johnson, 2010; Jackson & Johnson, 2012; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord et al., 1999; Wu et al., 2010) and influence leaders' effectiveness (Hogg, Martin, & Weeden, 2003; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord et al., 1999). By extension, we expect the self-concept to play a similar role regarding laissez-faire leadership.

Three levels of the self-concept have been identified (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brickson, 2000; Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord et al., 1999; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001; Sedikides, Gaertner, & O'Mara, 2011). The collective self-

concept involves the self-definition derived from belonging to groups such as organizations or teams; the relational self-concept involves a focus on dyadic relationships as a source of identity; and the individual self-concept stresses an individual's uniqueness and self-interests (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lord et al., 1999; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Even though the different levels may coexist within the same person, individuals differ regarding the importance they place on each level of the self-concept (Brewer & Chen, 2007).

Although the employee self-concept has been shown to exert a moderating role on leader effectiveness, this effect has been mostly studied using the collective self-concept (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Lord et al., 1999; Lord & Brown, 2004; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). However, the relational self-concept has been largely overlooked. This is surprising because individuals are more likely to be affected by threats at the relational level than by those at the collective level of the self (Gaertner et al., 2012). Moreover, the relational identity becomes relevant when one looks at the outcomes of the leader's actions from the perspective of the dyadic relationship (i.e., LMX; Chang & Johnson, 2010; Lord et al., 1999; Schyns & Day, 2010). As subordinates with strong relational self-concepts place a premium on dyadic exchanges (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016) and affective bonds with specific others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), their self-worth should be particularly dependent on how their leader responds to their relational expectations.

### ***Moderating Role of the Relational Self-concept***

Reliable role performance is rooted in how interactions between leader and subordinate unfold and whether the partners' role expectations are fulfilled (Graen & Scandura, 1987). By abdicating the responsibilities related to their role, laissez-faire leaders violate subordinates' role expectations (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad et al., 2007). However, the discrepancy between employees' expectations and leaders' behavior is likely stronger among employees with a relational self-identity because these employees are particularly sensitive to the fulfillment of role expectations (Andersen & Chen, 2002). Indeed, these

employees have important relational needs, entertain affective ties with significant others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Flynn, 2005; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016), and expect dyadic partners to engage in behaviors that satisfy their relational expectations. Therefore, they are likely to feel frustrated if their leader does not engage in actions liable to maintain the relationship vivid and constructive.

Laissez-faire leaders may discourage employees from investing resources in LMX (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012). Per the tenets of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), a balance is expected between inputs and contributions in LMX relationships (Kuvaas, Buch, Dysvik, & Haerem, 2012). As laissez-faire leaders fall short of maintaining balanced relationships (e.g., they delay decisions and do not take actions when needed), employees with relational self-concepts would experience this as a threat to their identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Flynn, 2005). This is so because they tend to define themselves in terms of their relations with others (Ferris, Yan, Lim, Chen, & Fatimah, 2016). Employees with a relational self-concept may thus experience their sense of self-worth as being undermined by the laissez-faire behavior of their leader (Swann Jr., Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2007), which would lower their motivation to cooperate with him or her (Tyler, 2003). As a result, employees with a relational self-concept may thrive to protect themselves by reducing their contribution to the relationship (Flynn, 2005). Thus, the lack of reciprocity (Herdman et al., 2017) instilled by laissez-faire behaviors would encourage these employees to reduce their contributions to the attainment of mutual goals, which represents an integral aspect of LMX (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). In sum, these employees would fall back on formal and contractual obligations (Erdogan & Liden, 2002; Liden & Graen, 1980; Shore, Bommer, Rao, & Seo, 2009).

*Hypothesis 1:* The employee's relational self-concept moderates the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and LMX-Contribution such that this relationship will be stronger (vs. weaker) and negative when the relational self-concept is high (vs. low).

### *Affective Organizational Commitment*



AOC reflects an emotional attachment to and identification with one's organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1997). It is the most impactful component of organizational commitment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001) and the most robust predictor of work-related behaviors (Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007). Multiple studies have reported a positive relationship between LMX and AOC (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000). AOC is one the most studied outcomes of LMX (Eisenberger et al., 2010; Meyer, 2016; Wayne et al., 2009). Liden and Maslyn (1998) theorized that the contribution dimension of LMX reflects a willingness to complete tasks that go beyond one's job description and benefit the organization as a whole. Thus, more specifically, LMX-Contribution should be positively related to AOC (Greguras & Ford, 2006; Lee, 2005; Shore & Wayne, 1993). Indeed, since leaders carry out responsibilities and make decisions on behalf of the organization, they are seen as representing the organization (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997) and as agents connecting employees to the organization (Seers & Graen, 1984). Therefore, positive exchange relationships between leaders and employees as reflected in strong LMX-Contribution should ultimately result in stronger AOC (Eisenberger, Aselage, Sucharski, & Jones, 2004).

As argued above, we expect a higher relational self-concept to be associated with a more negative relationship between laissez-faire leadership and LMX-Contribution. Following a social exchange account (Blau, 1964), this effect should extend to the indirect relationship between laissez-faire leadership and AOC. That is, employees with strong relational self-concepts should feel that their needs and expectations are unfulfilled when their leaders abdicate their responsibilities because dyadic relationships occupy a central place in these individuals' self-definitions. This feeling would encourage them to reduce their contribution to mutual goals. In turn, this decreased contribution would penalize employee commitment to the organization because the relative quality of the exchange relationship with the supervisor tends to generalize to the attachment to the organization (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002).

*Hypothesis 2:* The employee's relational self-concept moderates the indirect relationship between laissez-faire leadership and AOC through LMX-

Contribution such that this indirect relationship will be stronger (vs. weaker) and negative when the relational self-concept is high (vs. low).

### **1.3 Method**

#### *Sample and Procedure*

Data were gathered through survey questionnaires that were administered in three waves with intervals of four months on the online platform of Qualtrics. Participants were recruited through the alumni association of a French business school. Prospective participants received an email inviting them to participate in an online study of job attitudes based on three questionnaires administered over several months. They were informed of the study objectives and ensured that participation was voluntary and responses would be kept confidential. The criteria for participation were having (a) salaried employment and (b) an identifiable supervisor. To encourage participation, the respondents had the opportunity to make a \$5 gift to a charity of their choice at each wave of the surveys. The questionnaires were answered in French or English. At time 1, we measured the self-concept levels, laissez-faire leadership, LMX dimensions, AOC, and demographics, among other variables. The LMX dimensions were measured again at time 2, while AOC was also measured at time 3. The baseline (i.e., time 1) levels of the mediator (i.e., LMX-Contribution) and outcome (i.e., AOC) variables were controlled for while examining the moderation effect of the relational self-concept in the relationships among laissez-faire leadership, LMX-Contribution, and AOC. This approach provided a strong test of the longitudinal moderated mediation effects (Maxwell & Cole, 2007).

Excluding careless respondents ( $n = 4$ ) and participants who left supervisors or organizations during the study period ( $n = 60$ ), there remained 449 respondents at time 1, 182 at time 2, and 120 at time 3 (i.e., 27% response rate). We first examined whether respondent attrition across time was randomly distributed. Specifically, we conducted a logistic regression analysis with time 1 self-concept levels, laissez-faire leadership, LMX dimensions, AOC, and demographics predicting the probability of remaining in the sample at time 3 (Goodman & Blum, 1996). The logistic regression model was nonsignificant ( $\chi^2(13) = 15.15, ns$ ) and none of the predictors was significant, indicating

random attrition. Because the data were missing completely at random across time, we used full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation within structural equations modeling (see Results section) to test hypotheses (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). This estimation procedure uses all the available information from the covariance matrix ( $N = 449$ ) and is the recommended method for dealing with missing data (Newman, 2009).

In the final sample used for analyses, age averaged 37.67 years ( $SD = 9.00$ ), organizational tenure averaged 6.07 years ( $SD = 5.67$ ), and tenure with the supervisor averaged 2.95 years ( $SD = 2.28$ ). Most of the participants were women (63%), worked full-time (92%), had a graduate-level education (94%), and were employed in organizations of 1000 or more employees (56%). They worked in various industries, such as finance and insurance (15%), professional, scientific and technical services (11%), manufacturing (7%), health care and social assistance (5%), retail trade (5%), and information and cultural industries (4%).

### ***Measures***

When needed, French versions of the English scales were created using a translation-back-translation procedure (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). Responses were obtained on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), unless otherwise specified.

***Laissez-Faire Leadership.*** We measured laissez-faire leadership at time 1 using a 7-item version (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a, 2008b) of the laissez-faire scale from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X (Bass & Avolio, 1991). A sample item is “[In the past few weeks] my immediate supervisor avoided making decisions about my work,” with response options of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .93.

***LMX-Contribution.*** Participants answered the 12-item multidimensional measure of LMX (LMX-MDM) developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998) at time 1 and time 2, which contains four 3-item scales pertaining to the four LMX dimensions. The internal consistency for the 3-item LMX-Contribution scale was .79 at time 1 and .80 at time 2. A

sample item is “I do work for my supervisor that goes beyond what is specified in my job description.” For exploratory purposes, we also measured the other LMX dimensions using their respective 3-item scales: affect (e.g., “I like my supervisor very much as a person”;  $\alpha = .90$  at time 1 and  $.91$  at time 2); loyalty (e.g., “My supervisor would defend me to others in the organization if I made an honest mistake”;  $\alpha = .91$  at time 1 and  $.90$  at time 2); and professional respect (e.g., “I admire my supervisor’s professional skills”;  $\alpha = .94$  at time 1 and  $.95$  at time 2).

**AOC.** We measured AOC at time 1 and time 3 using an adapted version (Bentein, Vandenberg, Vandenberghe, & Stinglhamber, 2005) of Meyer, Allen, and Smith’s (1993) 6-item scale that was developed for international replications (cf., Meyer, Barak, & Vandenberghe, 1996). A typical item is “I feel emotionally attached to this organization.” The alpha coefficient for this scale was  $.93$  at time 1 and time 3.

**Relational Self-concept.** The relational self-concept was measured at time 1 through a 5-item scale developed by Selenta and Lord (2005) and used in Johnson et al. (2006). A factor analysis of the scale items indicated that one item (“Knowing that a close other acknowledges and values the role that I play in their life makes me feel like a worthwhile person”) had a low loading on the factor ( $< .40$ ) and reduced its internal consistency. Hence, we dropped that item from the scale. The remaining 4-item scale had a reliability of  $.71$ . A sample item is “If a friend was having a personal problem, I would help him/her even if it meant sacrificing my time or money.”

**Control Variables.** While testing our hypotheses and model, we controlled for the individual and collective levels of the self-concept, as other researchers have done (e.g., Johnson & Chang, 2008; Johnson et al., 2006). Indeed, as the three levels of the self-concept are generally correlated with one another (Kashima & Hardie, 2000), controlling for the individual and collective self-concepts helps avoid confounding effects. The individual ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and collective ( $\alpha = .77$ ) self-concepts were each measured at time 1 by a 5-item scale from Selenta and Lord (2005) (see also Johnson et al., 2006). Sample items include “I often compete with my friends” and “It is important to me to make a lasting contribution to groups that I belong to,” respectively.

## 1.4 Results

### *Confirmatory Factor Analyses*

First, as a preliminary test, we used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) through Mplus 7.31 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) and maximum likelihood (ML) estimation to examine the dimensionality of the LMX measure at time 2. We allowed the errors of items 7 and 8 of the scale to correlate, which is recommended when there is wording similarity (Marsh et al., 2010, 2013). The four-factor model of time 2 LMX yielded a good fit ( $\chi^2(47) = 87.00$ , CFI = .98, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .068, SRMR = .043) and outperformed a one-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 599.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the idea of treating LMX dimensions (e.g., LMX-Contribution) separately. Similarly, the eight-factor model including the four LMX dimensions at time 1 and time 2 yielded a good fit ( $\chi^2(212) = 558.06$ , CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .06) and outperformed a two-factor model (time 1 LMX vs. time 2 LMX) ( $\Delta\chi^2(27) = 1717.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and a one-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(28) = 2124.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Second, we tested the distinctiveness of our variables within the hypothesized eight-factor model (i.e., time 1 laissez-faire leadership, time 1 self-concept levels, time 1 LMX-Contribution, time 1 AOC, time 2 LMX-Contribution, and time 3 AOC) and compared this model with more parsimonious models using a nested sequence approach (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). The FIML method was used because it relies on all the available information from the covariance matrix (e.g., Enders, 2010; Fitzmaurice, Laird, & Ware, 2004; Graham, 2009, 2012) and is the recommended approach in longitudinal research when respondent attrition across time is random (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). The errors of parallel items were allowed to correlate across time (Geiser, 2012). In addition, the errors of two pairs of items of the same constructs were allowed to correlate within time due to wording similarity (Marsh et al., 2010, 2013) (i.e., laissez-faire: items 1 and 2; individual self-concept: items 1 and 5). These specifications were incorporated in the test of the longitudinal model (Little, 2013).

The CFA results are reported in Table 1. The hypothesized eight-factor model yielded a good fit ( $\chi^2(663) = 1373.00$ , CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .05). Moreover,

this model was superior to any simpler model obtained by merging specific factors ( $p < .01$ ). Our variables were thus distinguishable. As evidence of convergent validity, in the eight-factor model, loadings were significant ( $p < .001$ ) and sizeable (standardized factor loadings ranged from .48 to .90).

### ***Measurement Invariance***

Because our theoretical model controlled for time 1 LMX- Contribution and AOC, we needed to establish that their measurement was invariant across time to ensure that the construct meaning remained stable (Cole & Maxwell, 2003; Millsap, 2011). A sequential approach was adopted (e.g., Vandenberg & Lance, 2000) where increasingly stringent constraints were added to the CFA model of LMX-Contribution and AOC. Robust maximum likelihood (MLR) was used to test measurement invariance. The results are shown in Table 2. As we proceeded to test the sequence of constraints from configural invariance, to weak invariance (i.e., loadings), strong invariance (i.e., loadings and thresholds), and strict invariance (i.e., loadings, thresholds, and uniquenesses), the Satorra-Bentler scaled  $\chi^2$  values were non-significant at each step for both LMX-Contribution and AOC.<sup>1</sup> This finding indicates strict invariance for both variables across time, stable psychometric properties, and suitability for longitudinal analysis (Byrne, Shavelson, & Muthén, 1989; Cheung & Lau, 2012). Thus, these specifications were added to the longitudinal tests of our hypotheses.

### ***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations***

Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliability coefficients are reported in Table 3. Laissez-faire leadership was negatively related to time 2 LMX ( $r = -.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but unrelated to time 3 AOC ( $r = -.15$ , ns). Time 2 LMX-Contribution was positively related to time 3 AOC ( $r = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The relational self-concept was unrelated to laissez-faire leadership ( $r = -.04$ , ns) and time 2 LMX-Contribution ( $r = .04$ , ns) but positively correlated with time 3 AOC ( $r = .18$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### ***Hypothesis Testing***

We tested our hypotheses through latent moderated structural equation modeling

(LMS; Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000; Maslowsky, Jager, & Hemken, 2015; Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017) and maximum likelihood (i.e., FIML) estimation using numerical integration and raw data. We used the XWITH command in Mplus and robust standard errors estimation. By considering the measurement errors of the observed variables and factoring in the nonnormally distributed interactions of the latent variables, the LMS approach generates reliable estimates and unbiased standard errors, and has increased power to detect interaction effects (Cheung & Lau, 2017; Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000; Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017). Thus far, LMS is the most efficient and unbiased approach to testing interactions among latent variables (Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000; Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017; Schermelleh-Engel, Werner, Klein, & Moosbrugger, 2010).

As LMS does not assume multivariate normality, commonly used fit indices (e.g., RMSEA, CFI, TLI; Maslowsky et al., 2015) are not provided. We therefore followed the recommended two-step approach (Dimitruk, Schermelleh-Engel, Kelava, & Moosbrugger, 2007; Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017) to test our hypotheses. We first assessed the fit of a baseline model where the interaction between laissez-faire and the relational self-concept was constrained to zero. We then compared this model with a model including the interaction term. The two models were compared using a log-likelihood difference test (D-2LL; Dimitruk et al., 2007) and the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) indices (Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017). A significant D-2LL value indicates that the augmented model should be retained as the best model (Dimitruk et al., 2007), while smaller values for the AIC and BIC are needed to ensure that there is no dramatic loss of information relative to the baseline model (Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017). We used 95% confidence intervals (CIs) from 5000 bootstrap samples (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004) in Mplus and the ML estimator for testing the significance of the moderation and moderated mediation effects predicted in Hypotheses 1–2.

***Hypothesis 1.*** The baseline model including the main effects of laissez-faire leadership and relational self-concept on time 2 LMX-Contribution, controlling for time 1 LMX-Contribution and the main effects of individual and collective self-concepts,

yielded a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(311) = 636.83$ , CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05). However, the moderated model outperformed the baseline model (D-2LL(1) = 10.29,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, this model displayed smaller values for the AIC (27,594.32 vs. 27,601.25) and BIC (27,984.48 vs. 27,987.31). Thus, the moderated model was retained. As shown in Table 4, the interaction between laissez-faire leadership and the relational self-concept predicting LMX-Contribution was significant ( $B = -.67$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The interaction is graphed in Fig. 1. Laissez-faire leadership was significantly negatively related to LMX-Contribution ( $B = -.34$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p < .05$ ) when relational self-concept was high (1 *SD* above the mean) but unrelated to LMX-Contribution ( $B = .26$ ,  $SE = .14$ , *ns*) when relational self-concept was low (1 *SD* below the mean). Moreover, the difference between these two relationships was significant ( $B = -.60$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Interestingly, the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and LMX-Contribution was significantly negative ( $p < .05$ ) when relational self-concept had a standardized value of at least .245 but was significantly positive ( $p < .05$ ) when relational self-concept had a standardized value of  $-.572$  or lower. Hypothesis 1 is thus supported.

**Hypothesis 2.** The moderated mediation relationship predicted in Hypothesis 2 was tested following Sardeshmukh and Vandenberg's (2017) recommendations. We first specified a mediation model including (a) the main effects of laissez-faire leadership and relational self-concept on Time 2 LMX-Contribution, controlling for Time 1 LMX-Contribution, and on Time 3 AOC, controlling for Time 1 AOC, and (b) the effect of Time 2 LMX-Contribution on Time 3 AOC. Moreover, the model controlled for the main effects of the individual and collective self-concepts on Time 2 LMX-Contribution and Time 3 AOC. This baseline model showed an acceptable fit,  $\chi^2(688) = 1328.24$ , CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .05. We then compared this model to a moderated mediation model in which relational self-identity moderated the first stage of the mediated relationship between laissez-faire leadership and Time 3 AOC through Time 2 LMX-Contribution. The latter model outperformed the baseline model (D-2LL(1) = 9.31,  $p < .01$ ) and displayed smaller values for the AIC (35619.84 vs. 35627.67) and BIC (36161.97 vs. 36165.69). Thus, this model was retained and used to examine the conditional indirect effects of interest.



Using bootstrapping, the indirect relationship between laissez-faire leadership and Time 3 AOC through Time 2 LMX-Contribution was found to be significantly negative ( $B = -.05$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [-.111, -.002]) when relational self-concept was high (1 *SD* above the mean) but nonsignificant ( $B = .04$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95% CI [-.004, .098]) when relational self-concept was low (1 *SD* below the mean) (Table 4). Moreover, the difference between these two relationships was significant ( $B = -.09$ ,  $SE = .05$ , 95% CI [-.197, -.007]). Notably, the conditional indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership was significantly negative ( $p < .05$ ) when relational self-concept had a standardized value of at least .387. Hypothesis 2 is thus supported. The path estimates associated with the moderated mediation model as obtained by standardizing the data before analysis (e.g., Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000; Maslowsky et al., 2015) are reported in Fig. 2<sup>2</sup>.

### **Additional Analyses**

We explored the possibility that a relational self-concept could moderate the indirect relationship between laissez-faire leadership and Time 3 AOC through the other dimensions of (Time 2) LMX, namely affect, loyalty, and professional respect. Using the same procedure as for testing Hypothesis 2, we found the baseline models to display a good fit [LMX-Affect:  $\chi^2(688) = 1196.57$ , CFI = .94, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .04; LMX-Loyalty:  $\chi^2(688) = 1167.63$ , CFI = .94, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .04; LMX-Professional respect:  $\chi^2(688) = 1210.72$ , CFI = .94, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .04]. However, the moderated mediation model with Time 2 LMX-Affect, LMX-Loyalty, and LMX-Professional respect as alternative mediators did not improve over the baseline model [D-2LL(1) = 2.61, *ns*; D-2LL(1) = 3.30, *ns*; and D-2LL(1) = 1.65, *ns*; respectively]. This finding indicates that the relational self-concept did not moderate the indirect relationship between laissez-faire leadership and Time 3 AOC through the other dimensions of Time 2 LMX.

Similarly, we examined whether the collective and individual self-concepts exerted a similar moderating effect in our mediation model. The baseline model (which was identical in both cases) displayed a good fit [ $\chi^2(688) = 1328.24$ , CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .05]. Unexpectedly, for both self-concept levels, we found that the moderated mediation model improved over the baseline model [D-2LL(1) = 5.75,  $p < .05$  (collective self-concept); and

D-2LL(1) = 5.77,  $p < .05$  (individual self-concept)]. In these models, the interaction between laissez-faire and the collective ( $B = -.40$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the individual ( $B = -.29$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) self-concept were significant predictors of LMX-Contribution. The relationship between laissez-faire leadership and LMX-Contribution was significantly negative at high levels (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean) of the collective ( $B = -.32$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and individual ( $B = -.26$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ) self-concept but non-significant at low levels (1 *SD* below the mean) of these moderators ( $B = .19$ ,  $SE = .15$ , *ns*; and  $B = .10$ ,  $SE = .12$ , *ns*; respectively). Differences between the two relationships were also significant for both the collective and the individual self-concept ( $B = -.52$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and  $B = -.36$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively).

Moreover, the indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership on AOC through LMX-Contribution was significantly negative ( $B = -.05$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95% CI [-.113, -.006]) when collective self-concept was high (1 *SD* above the mean) but nonsignificant ( $B = .03$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95% CI [-.004, .108]) when it was low (1 *SD* below the mean); the difference between the two effects was significant ( $B = -.08$ ,  $SE = .04$ , 95% CI [-.208, -.013]). In contrast, the indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership on AOC was nonsignificant at both high ( $B = -.04$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95% CI [-.083, .000]) and low ( $B = .02$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95% CI [-.022, .055]) levels of individual self-concept and did not differ across levels of this moderator ( $B = -.05$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [-.116, .000]). We elaborate on these results in the discussion.

## 1.5 Discussion

This study demonstrates that the relational self-concept acts as an important individual difference variable that affects the strength of the relationships among laissez-faire leadership, the LMX contribution dimension, and AOC. Using a three-wave longitudinal study, these relationships were found to be stronger and negative among employees with strong relational self-concepts. As such, this study is a preliminary attempt to examine the mechanisms and boundary conditions that explain how laissez-faire leadership practices affect subordinates' reactions. Our conclusions are particularly robust given the use of a longitudinal approach that controlled for the baseline levels of

the mediator and outcome variables. The next sections outline the implications of this study for our understanding of laissez-faire leadership.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The overriding goal of the present study was foremost to address the theoretical gap surrounding the mechanisms and boundary conditions specifying when and how laissez-faire leadership is expected to relate to AOC. This research endeavor was timely given recent calls to increase our understanding of the effects of laissez-faire leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008; Wong & Giessner, 2018; Yang, 2015) and the need to account for subordinates' characteristics in examining these effects (Nielsen, Skogstad, Gjerstad, & Einarsen, 2019). Building on the identity orientation framework (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), we posited that a relational self-concept drives an employee's perception and evaluation of the appropriateness of laissez-faire leadership behaviors. Specifically, because dyadic relationships with significant others (e.g., supervisors) are an important part of an employee's self-definition, employees with strong relational self-concepts have high expectations about their leaders' behavior. Laissez-faire leadership violates these expectations, resulting in a reduced willingness of employees to contribute to the mutual goals associated with the relationship. As such, this study furthers our knowledge of the role of employees' characteristics, which are usually neglected in studies about negative leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). It also contributes to a growing body of literature that has highlighted the role of the employee self-concept as an important trait-like variable to consider in work settings (e.g., van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

The present results are consistent with the view that, even if laissez-faire leadership is a form of passive leadership, it can have destructive effects (e.g., Skogstad et al., 2007) because it can damage the employee-supervisor relationship and organizational commitment, at least when employees have strong relational self-concepts. This view extends the LMX literature, which has traditionally focused on the outcomes rather than on the predictors of LMX (Erdogan & Liden, 2002; Yukl, O'Donnell, & Taber, 2009). Furthermore, our results demonstrate that different styles of leadership may foster different aspects of LMX (e.g., Lee, 2005) and provide further support to the benefits of considering

a disaggregated approach to the study of LMX. Moreover, previous research has mostly investigated leadership antecedents that may foster LMX, such as transformational leadership (e.g., Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005), neglecting those leadership styles that act as negative antecedents of LMX. The present results suggest that LMX is affected by negative forms of leadership, which should encourage researchers to examine negative reciprocity as a specific mechanism accounting for the sensitivity of LMX to negative leadership.

Nonetheless, the present findings suggest that the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership are not universal. Rather, these effects particularly occur when employees hold strong relational self-concepts. As such, the relational self-concept is particularly important to explain the impact of laissez-faire leadership on AOC, possibly because individuals with relational self-concepts are more inclined to direct their affective reactions toward their exchange partners (Flynn, 2005), which are then generalized to the organization. Consequently, it appears important to consider the intraindividual context of laissez-faire leadership. Our results also echo Johnson and Chang's (2008) proposition that individual differences may calibrate employees' relative sensitivity to the antecedents of AOC. The present findings indicate that employees with low relational self-concepts do not reduce their contribution to mutual goals when they are exposed to laissez-faire leadership. They may even increase this contribution when they hold very low relational self-concepts. Thus, laissez-faire leadership cannot be said to be universally detrimental to employees' relationship with supervisors and attachment to the organization. This observation goes against the literature that has concluded to consistent negative effects of laissez-faire leadership across situations and contexts (e.g., Bass & Bass, 2008).

As self-concepts and their associated needs shape the perception and interpretation of what constitutes appropriate leader behavior, it is actually the congruence between leader behavior and employees' expectations and needs that would drive employee reactions (e.g., Wong & Giessner, 2018). Thus, leaders need to adjust their behavior to followers' characteristics, an argument set forth by the theories of situational or contingent leadership (Fiedler, 2006; Vroom & Jago, 2007; Yukl, 2010). By extension, one may think that

followers differ in their needs for leadership and that it is the nonresponse to employees' specific needs that has the largest influence (de Vries, Roe, & Taillieu, 2002). In sum, this study provides a preliminary answer to Bass and Bass's (2008, p. 1193) call for addressing the question of "when is laissez-faire leadership appropriate and effective?"

### ***Directions for Future Research***

Unexpectedly, all three levels of the self-concept were found to enhance the impact of laissez-faire leadership. Therefore, in addition to the relational expectations associated with the relational self-concept, other mechanisms may come into play. One potential mechanism is that individuals may be sensitive to any threat to their self-definitions and the accomplishment of the goals they are striving for (e.g., Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). Laissez-faire leaders would have negative effects because they would fall short of meeting the expectations and goals associated with all three self-concept levels. We speculate that when any level of the self-concept is high, a feeling of identity threat will emerge from exposure to laissez-faire leadership. For example, as employees with strong individual self-concepts are committed to achieve career goals (Johnson, Chang, & Yang, 2010), they may be frustrated by laissez-faire leaders because they do not take actions that facilitate their career progress. Similarly, employees with strong collective self-concepts take the well-being of their workgroup to heart (Johnson et al., 2010) and may thus be disappointed to see laissez-faire leaders not working at building cohesion within their workgroup, which would threaten their identities as members of the group. This may reduce their contributions to mutual goals and ultimately AOC. In line with these avenues for future inquiry, past research has suggested that the same leadership style may influence multiple identity-related processes among employees (e.g., Wu et al., 2010). Future research is needed to examine how laissez-faire leadership can threaten the achievement of the goals associated with each of the self-concept levels.

Another avenue for future research would be to examine why leaders engage in laissez-faire behaviors. Do they simply engage in laissez-faire behaviors unknowingly or because they do not have the desire, the knowledge, or the resources to fulfill their prescribed role? Courtright, Colbert, and Choi (2014) suggested that leaders may engage in such behaviors

due to developmental challenges and emotional exhaustion. Studying the antecedents of and potential explanations for such behaviors would increase our knowledge regarding when laissez-faire leadership behaviors emerge in the workplace, hence contributing to leadership development (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). While these reasons may differ across leaders, identifying those factors that foster laissez-faire practices would help work against its potentially harmful effects and implement interventions that limit their occurrence. For example, examining leaders' own self-concept levels would be worthwhile (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Speculatively, leaders with strong individual self-concepts may be more focused on their own ambitions and personal goals, thus neglecting employees' needs, which may pave the way for laissez-faire behaviors. These leaders may want to move up the corporate ladder and think that a management position is a step toward this goal, even in the absence of a personal desire to supervise employees. Previous research has associated the individual self-concept with more frequent abusive behaviors (Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, & Chang, 2012). This logic could be extended to laissez-faire leadership, with stronger individual self-concepts making leaders more prone to engage in laissez-faire behaviors.

More generally, laissez-faire leadership remains an understudied form of leadership. One area where more work is needed concerns the similarities and differences between laissez-faire leadership and other destructive forms of leadership. In a recent meta-analysis of destructive leadership in military contexts, Fosse, Skogstad, Einarsen, and Martinussen (2019) found that active-destructive leadership (e.g., abusive supervision, supervisor undermining) and passive-destructive leadership (e.g., laissez-faire) had similar negative relationships with job performance, job attitudes, and employee health and well-being. However, as LMX was not included in the outcomes addressed in this meta-analytic review, it remains unclear how the different forms of destructive leadership distinctively contribute to undermine LMX development and whether some LMX dimensions are particularly affected by them. Future research should thus attempt to disentangle the effects of the different forms of destructive leadership on LMX development.

### *Practical Implications*

Organizations should train leaders to detect, reduce, and understand the implications of laissez-faire behaviors, just as they do for positive leadership practices. This approach would help practitioners to know not only when to act but also when not to act. Practitioners should be aware that appropriate actions may not only depend on situations per se but on an employee's specific needs as well. Discrepancies between the leader's behaviors and the employee's expectations or specific needs may explain the relative impact of laissez-faire leadership. Therefore, interventions implemented to increase the quality of relationships between employees and leaders and to foster organizational commitment must be adapted based on employees' levels of the self-concept because these levels drive their expectations. As our research has shown, even individuals who tend to focus on contributing to others' well-being (i.e., with a strong relational self-concept; Brewer & Gardner, 1996) are still capable of developing attitudes and behaviors that go against their natural tendencies. Thus, laissez-faire leadership may result in the relational potential of employees being wasted because it promotes inappropriate behaviors. Practitioners should take the time to get to know their employees' needs and self-concepts, communicate on these aspects, and strive to fulfill employees' expectations. Hence, organizations should pay greater attention to the diversity of employees' characteristics to fully realize the potential of their employees. Recognizing the diversity of identity-related expectations should be reflected in programs and practices, such as recruitment and socialization processes (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016), that are tied to employees' self-concept orientations (Pratt, 2000). By taking advantage of these diverse opportunities, organizations could build stronger bonds and hope for better performance and increased retention among employees.

### ***Limitations***

As study measures were self-reported, common method bias may be an issue (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). Nonetheless, self-reports might be appropriate given our focus on perceptions of self-identity levels and attitudes in the workplace (Conway & Lance, 2010; Spector 2006). Previous research on the self-concept has indeed traditionally relied on self-report measures (Byrne, 2002). Moreover, our longitudinal analysis controlled for the baseline levels of both the mediator (i.e., LMX-Contribution) and outcome (i.e., AOC) variables, thus considerably reducing any

endogeneity related to our findings (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) and lending confidence to their robustness. Furthermore, because our hypotheses focused on the interaction between laissez-faire leadership and the relational self-concept, common method variance is unlikely to have affected the findings (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). We also recognize that this study used a specific sample of highly educated employees from a culturally individualistic context. It is possible that different results would be found in a collectivistic culture, as self-concepts are known to be developed in relation to the social context and to vary across cultures (Oyserman, 2001). Hence, people from a Western culture would have stronger individual self-concepts, while those from Eastern countries would possess stronger collective identities (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Nonetheless, even if some findings seem to support a universalist perspective of the self (Sedikides et al., 2011), future research is needed to further examine the generalizability of our findings. Finally, we used the LMX-MDM measure (Liden & Maslyn, 1998) to capture the social exchange-based relationship between employees and leaders. However, this instrument has been criticized for providing an imperfect assessment of social exchange, leading to the development of *leader-member social exchange* (LMSX) as an alternative measure of the construct (Bernerth, Armenakis, Feild, Giles, & Walker, 2007). It would be worth exploring whether the current findings could be replicated using this alternative measure of social exchange relationships in employee-supervisor dyads.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

The present study indicates that laissez-faire leadership negatively relates to AOC through decreased levels of the LMX contribution dimension but only when the employee's relational self-concept is high. As such, this study highlights how relational expectations can strengthen the (negative) impact of laissez-faire leadership and reveals that it is through employees' reduced contribution to mutual goals that AOC comes to be affected by laissez-faire leadership. We hope the present study will encourage future attempts at exploring the conditions and mechanisms associated with the effects of laissez-faire leadership in organizations.



## Footnotes

**Footnote 1 (p. 24).** Note that we did not allow the errors of T1 item 1 and T2 item 1 to correlate in the invariance tests of the LMX-Contribution scale across time because the models including that specification did not converge.

**Footnote 2 (p. 27).** Although our study controlled for the baseline levels of the mediator (LMX- Contribution) and AOC, the data were not cross-lagged, making it possible that AOC drives LMX-Contribution over time. To examine this possibility, we used data from a separate sample to test a cross-lagged model of LMX- Contribution and AOC over a period of 6 months. These data were part of a larger project examining job attitudes and the study was conducted in French. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from the network of the research team. The time 1 sample comprised 312 respondents. In this initial sample, 22 participants changed organizations and 37 participants changed supervisors before the time 2 survey (i.e., six months later), hence were dropped, reducing the sample to 253 individuals. In this sample, 119 participants provided usable responses at time 2. We first examined whether attrition over time was randomly distributed by conducting a logistic regression analysis predicting the probability of remaining in (vs. being dropped from) the final sample among time 1 respondents ( $N = 253$ ) using time 1 variables (i.e., LMX-Contribution and AOC) as predictors. The logistic regression model was nonsignificant ( $\chi^2(2) = 3.51, ns$ ) and none of the predictors was significant. This indicates that data were missing completely at random (MCAR; Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010) over time, allowing us to examine our cross-lagged model using all the available information from the covariance matrix ( $N = 253$ ) through the FIML method and MLR in Mplus (version 7.31 was used; Muthén & Muthén, 2010). In the sample ( $N = 253$ ), 63% of the participants were female, average age was 38.77 years ( $SD = 10.22$ ), and average organizational tenure was 7.89 years ( $SD = 6.05$ ). Participants worked in a variety of industries such as professional, scientific and technical services (23%), health services and social assistance (18%), and finance, insurance, real estate and public administration (16%). AOC was measured using the same 6-item, adapted version of Meyer et al.'s (1993) original scale (Bentein et al., 2005) as in the main study. The same 3-item scale of LMX-Contribution from the LMX-MDM instrument (Liden & Maslyn, 1998) as in the main study was also used. The internal consistency was good for both AOC ( $\alpha_s = .88$  and  $.89$  at time 1 and time 2, respectively) and LMX-Contribution ( $\alpha_s = .76$  and  $.74$  at time 1 and time 2, respectively). The strict invariance model was used for AOC and the weak invariance model was used for LMX-Contribution because adding further constraints revealed significant differences with less constrained models of invariance. Nonetheless, retaining weak invariance still allows testing the relations among latent constructs (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). The cross-lagged model yielded a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(141) = 223.77, p < .001, CFI = .95, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05$ ). In this model, time 1 LMX-Contribution was significantly related to time 2 AOC ( $B = .24, SE = .09, p < .01$ ), controlling for its autoregressive effect ( $B = .67, SE = .08, p < .001$ ). In contrast, time 1 AOC did not relate to time 2 LMX-Contribution ( $B = .01, SE = .10, ns$ ), controlling for its autoregressive effect ( $B = .74, SE = .13, p < .001$ ). These results provide support for the idea that LMX-Contribution temporally precedes AOC, which is consistent with the model presented in Fig. 2.

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**Table 1.** *Fit indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models*

	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
1. Hypothesized eight-factor solution	1373.00*	663	.92	.91	.05	–	–
2. Seven-factor solution, combining T1 AOC and T3 AOC	1653.69*	670	.88	.87	.06	280.69*	7
3. Seven-factor solution, combining T1 LMX-C and T2 LMX-C	1498.81*	670	.90	.89	.05	125.81*	7
4. Seven-factor solution, combining T1 laissez-faire leadership and T2 LMX-C	1581.26*	670	.89	.88	.06	208.25*	7
5. Seven-factor solution, combining T1 RSC and CSC	1611.18*	670	.89	.88	.06	238.18*	7
6. Seven-factor solution, combining T1 RSC and ISC	2162.32*	670	.82	.81	.07	789.32*	7
7. Seven-factor solution, combining T2 LMX-C and T3 AOC	1549.96*	670	.90	.89	.05	176.96*	7
8. Six-factor solution, combining T1 LMX-C with T2 LMX-C, and T1 AOC with T3 AOC	1774.96*	676	.87	.86	.06	401.96*	13
9. Six-factor solution, combining all self-concept variables	2402.76*	676	.80	.78	.08	1029.75*	13
10. One-factor solution, combining all variables	6102.10*	694	.36	.32	.13	4729.10*	31

*Note:*  $N = 449$ , based on full information maximum likelihood estimation. *df* = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; AOC = affective organizational commitment; LMX-C = leader-member exchange, contribution dimension; RSC = relational self-concept; CSC = collective self-concept; ISC = individual self-concept. \* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** *Tests of Measurement Invariance across Time*

	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	Model comparison	<i>SB</i> $\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
LMX-Contribution								
Model 1: Configural invariance	9.89	6	.99	.98	.04	–		–
Model 2: Weak invariance (loadings)	11.18	8	1.00	.99	.03	2 vs. 1	1.27	2
Model 3: Strong invariance (loadings, thresholds)	11.61	10	1.00	1.01	.02	3 vs. 2	0.24	2
Model 4: Strict invariance (loadings, thresholds, uniquenesses)	14.89	13	1.00	1.01	.02	4 vs. 3	3.29	3
AOC								
Model 1: Configural invariance	186.76*	47	.94	.92	.08	–		–
Model 2: Weak invariance (loadings)	196.96*	52	.94	.92	.08	2 vs. 1	4.94	5
Model 3: Strong invariance (loadings, thresholds)	205.70*	57	.94	.93	.08	3 vs. 2	7.86	5
Model 4: Strict invariance (loadings, thresholds, uniquenesses)	206.70*	63	.94	.94	.07	4 vs. 3	2.01	6

*Note:* Full information maximum likelihood estimation was used. *df* = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SB = Santorra-Bentler scaled. \**p* < .05.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Age	37.67	9.00	–																	
2. Gender	1.53	0.50	-.14**	–																
3. Organizational tenure (years)	6.07	5.67	.42**	-.12*	–															
4. Tenure with the supervisor (years)	2.95	2.28	.22**	-.10*	.34**	–														
5. Laissez-faire leadership (T1)	2.36	1.11	.10*	.07	.09	.08	(.93)													
6. Relational self-concept (T1)	4.46	0.52	.03	.12*	-.03	.02	-.04	(.71)												
7. Individual self-concept (T1)	2.91	0.92	-.23**	-.14**	-.06	-.03	.10*	-.03	(.82)											
8. Collective self-concept (T1)	4.18	0.62	.14**	.04	.00	.04	.01	.27**	.05	(.77)										
9. LMX-Contribution (T1)	3.78	0.86	.02	-.07	.05	.13**	-.23**	.16**	.08	.34**	(.79)									
10. LMX-Affect (T1)	3.50	1.07	-.02	.01	-.01	-.05	-.50**	.09	.00	.09	.41**	(.90)								
11. LMX-Loyalty (T1)	3.53	1.07	-.10*	-.03	-.03	.00	-.58**	.06	.03	.06	.40**	.68**	(.91)							
12. LMX-Professional respect (T1)	3.47	1.17	-.09	-.01	-.08	.01	-.49**	.07	.06	.16**	.50**	.57**	.54**	(.94)						
13. AOC (T1)	3.23	1.03	.06	-.08	.15**	.09	-.16**	.09	.04	.40**	.37**	.22**	.22**	.30**	(.93)					
14. LMX-Contribution (T2)	3.55	0.91	.07	-.21**	.08	.16*	-.22**	.04	.07	.10	.60**	.32**	.23**	.40**	.23**	(.80)				
15. LMX-Affect (T2)	3.49	1.12	-.08	.05	-.07	-.04	-.45**	.00	.00	.04	.40**	.78**	.57**	.51**	.15*	.43**	(.91)			
16. LMX-Loyalty (T2)	3.44	1.11	-.14	.04	-.04	.01	-.49**	.02	.04	-.05	.27**	.57**	.72**	.40**	.10	.32**	.71**	(.90)		
17. LMX-Professional respect (T2)	3.39	1.19	.00	-.04	-.12	.03	-.47**	-.01	.04	.06	.41**	.45**	.39**	.76**	.16*	.46**	.56**	.51**	(.95)	
18. AOC (T3)	3.19	0.99	-.12	-.02	.21*	.08	-.15	.18*	-.06	.25**	.23*	.13	.14	.32**	.73**	.36**	.17	.24**	.21*	(.93)

Note: Correlations are based on the data available at a given time: T1 *N* = 449, T2 *N* = 182, T3 *N* = 120. For Gender, 1 = male, 2 = female. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; LMX = leader-member exchange; AOC = affective organizational commitment. Cronbach's alphas are reported in parentheses along the diagonal. \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01

**Table 4.** Path Analysis Results for the Moderation and Moderated Mediation Models

Variable	Moderation				Moderated mediation				
	Baseline model		Moderated model		Baseline model		Moderated mediation model		
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	95% CI
T1 Laissez-faire → T2 LMX-C	-.06	.09	-.04	.08	-.07	.09	-.05	.08	[-.209, .110]
T1 RSC → T2 LMX-C	.27	.22	.33	.24	.27	.23	.36	.25	[-.151, .885]
T1 CSC → T2 LMX-C	-.29	.16	-.31	.16	-.28	.16	-.31	.17	[-.646, .098]
T1 ISC → T2 LMX-C	-.01	.12	-.02	.12	-.00	.12	-.01	.11	[-.243, .219]
T1 LMX-C → T2 LMX-C	.73***	.09	.74***	.09	.73***	.09	.74***	.09	[.571, .959]
T1 Laissez-faire x T1 RSC → T2 LMX-C			-.67*	.28			-.69*	.28	[-1.317, -.174]
T1 Laissez-faire → T3 AOC					-.09	.07	-.09	.07	[-.233, .041]
T1 RSC → T3 AOC					.51*	.24	.57*	.25	[.046, 1.122]
T1 CSC → T3 AOC					-.22	.13	-.24	.14	[-.509, .106]
T1 ISC → T3 AOC					-.12	.09	-.12	.09	[-.316, .061]
T1 AOC → T3 AOC					.72***	.06	.72***	.06	[.595, .859]
T2 LMX-C → T3 AOC					.15**	.05	.14**	.05	[.023, .249]
First stage moderation:									
High RSC (+1SD)			-.34*	.15			-.36*	.15	[-.672, -.067]
Mean (0)			-.04	.08			-.05	.08	[-.209, .110]
Low RSC (-1SD)			.26	.14			.26	.15	[-.015, .595]
Difference (±1SD)			-.60*	.25			-.62*	.25	[-1.185, -.156]
Indirect effect:									
High RSC (+1SD)							-.05*	.03	[-.111, -.002]
Mean (0)							-.01	.01	[-.033, .017]
Low RSC (-1SD)							.04	.02	[-.004, .098]
Difference (±1SD)							-.09*	.05	[-.197, -.007]

Note.  $N = 449$ , based on full information maximum likelihood estimation. B = unstandardized beta coefficient; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; LMX-C = leader-member exchange, contribution dimension; RSC = relational self-concept; CSC = collective self-concept; ISC = individual self-concept; AOC = affective organizational commitment.

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

**Figure 1.** Interaction between laissez-faire leadership and relational self-concept (RSC) predicting LMX-Contribution. Relationships are shown at one 1 SD below and above the mean of RSC.

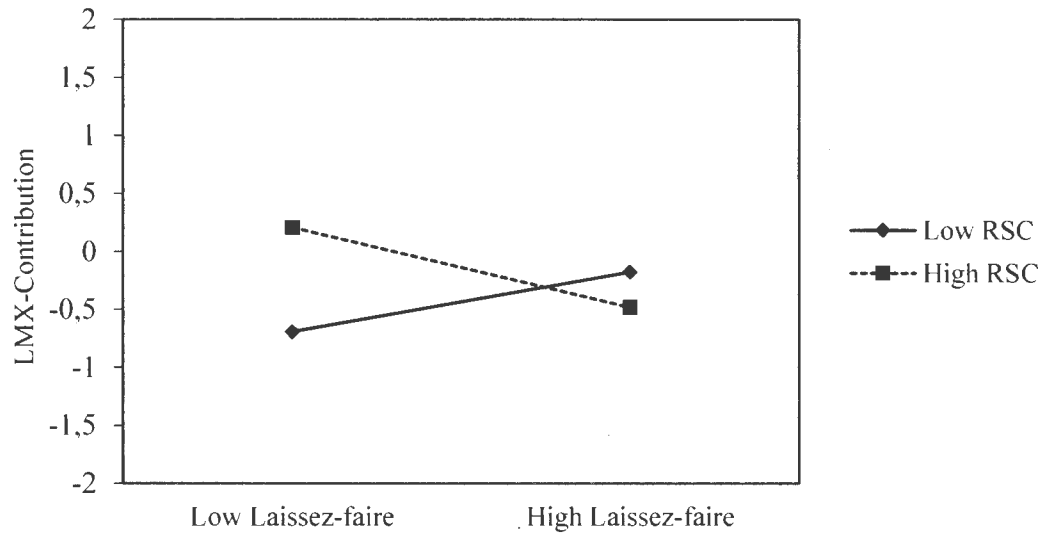
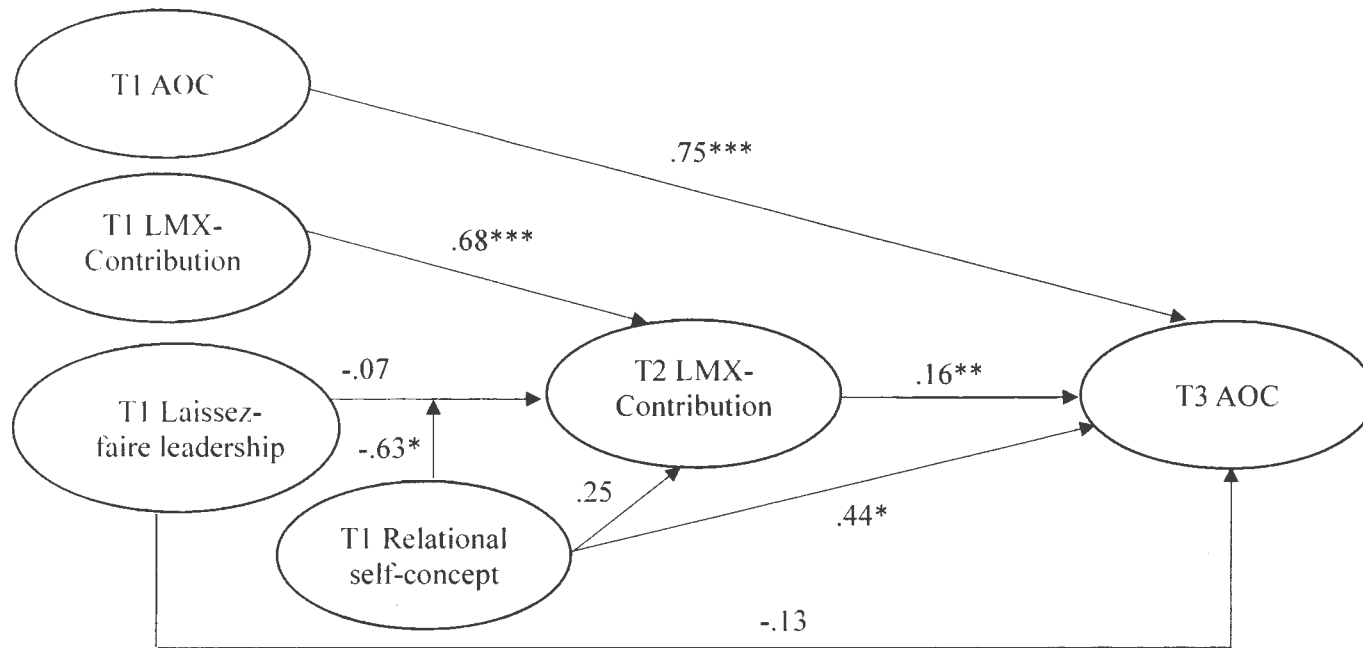


Figure 2. Standardized parameter estimates for the moderated mediation model.



T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; LMX = leader-member exchange; AOC = affective organizational commitment. For the sake of parsimony, control variables (i.e., individual and collective self-concepts) are omitted (their effects are reported in Table 4). Correlations among exogenous variables are not shown.

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



## **Chapter 2**

# **Laissez-Faire Leadership and Employee Well-Being: The Contribution of Perceived Supervisor Organizational Status**

### **Abstract**

The role of leaders has been increasingly studied in connection to employee health. However, little attention has been given to the effect of passive forms of leadership such as laissez-faire leadership. Two studies examined the effects of laissez-faire leadership on positive and negative aspects of employee psychological well-being. Due to its passive nature, we expected laissez-faire leadership to relate to reduced positive mental health and more depressive symptoms among employees. Moreover, we predicted these relations to be exacerbated when supervisors are perceived to hold a high organizational status. Results from a three-wave time-lagged study (Study 1:  $N = 608$ ) indicated that laissez-faire leadership was associated with reduced positive mental health and more depressive symptoms over time and provided partial support for the moderating role of perceived supervisor organizational status. Study 2 was a vignette experiment ( $N = 190$ ) that examined the effects of laissez-faire leadership, constructive leadership, and abusive supervision conditions on employee well-being. Results indicated that in the laissez-faire leadership condition employee well-being was worse than in the constructive leadership condition but better than in the abusive supervision condition. We discuss the implications of these results for research on laissez-faire leadership and psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** laissez-faire leadership; psychological well-being; mental health; depressive symptoms; supervisor organizational status.

## 2.1 Introduction

As agents of the organization (Erdogan & Enders, 2007), supervisors may exert a prominent influence on employee psychological well-being (Nielsen & Taris, 2019) because “the essence of [employees’] experience in organizations is tempered by the immediate leaders” (Dulebohn et al., 2012, p. 1726). However, the role of leaders in occupational health remains scarcely studied (Inceoglu et al., 2018). While constructive forms of leadership have been shown to positively relate to employee health (e.g., Arnold, 2017; Kelloway et al., 2012), much less is known about the effects of destructive leadership (Montano et al., 2017), particularly passive forms of leadership (Skogstad et al., 2017). Obviously, there is a dearth of research on the effects of laissez-faire leadership on employee health, despite it being the most prevalent form of destructive leadership (Aasland et al., 2010). The present paper aims at contributing to fill this gap by examining the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and psychological well-being, while considering how its effects may differ from those of active forms of leadership.

Defined as the abdication of one’s responsibilities (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad, Aasland et al., 2014), laissez-faire leadership is described as the “epitome of ineptness and ineffectiveness” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 194). As such, one may expect laissez-faire leadership to be negatively related to employee psychological well-being. However, it is worth noting that psychological well-being is conceptualized as both the absence of negative health symptoms (i.e., ill-being) and the presence of positive mental health (i.e., well-being) (Montano et al., 2017; World Health Organization [WHO], 2013b). While recent research has reported negative effects of laissez-faire leadership on health outcomes (e.g., Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Trépanier et al., 2019; Usman et al., 2020), to our knowledge little research has examined the relation between laissez-faire leadership and both positive and negative aspects of psychological well-being (for an exception regarding passive leadership, see Barling & Frone, 2017). This study will explore how laissez-faire leadership relates to employees’ positive mental health and depressive symptoms. In doing so, this article contributes to the organizational health literature by highlighting the role of leaders in the development of depressive disorders.

one of the world leading causes in disability (WHO, 2017), and by providing insights into the causes of mental health issues in the workplace.

Besides the dearth of research on the relation between laissez-faire leadership and psychological well-being, one knows little about the contextual factors that may alter the influence of laissez-faire leadership (Inceoglu et al., 2018; Walsh & Arnold, 2020). However, the context may influence the experience of these passive behaviors (Robinson et al., 2013). Specifically, we argue that the effects of laissez-faire leadership on well-being may be amplified when the supervisor is perceived to have a high organizational status. As the behavior of supervisors with high perceived organizational status is more likely to be endorsed by the organization, employees may ascribe responsibility to their organization for the supervisor's laissez-faire leadership. Thus, if employees perceive that the organization has bestowed power and influence to the supervisor (Eisenberger et al., 2002), laissez-faire leadership by these highly valued organizational members may be more impactful on employees' positive mental health and depressive symptoms.

This paper makes several contributions to research on laissez-faire leadership and well-being. First, we expand the literature on passive forms of destructive leadership (Che et al., 2017) by exploring how laissez-faire leadership affects employees' mental health and depressive symptoms, and as such contribute to increase knowledge about a ubiquitous form of leadership (Aasland et al., 2010) that remains under-investigated (Skogstad et al., 2017). Second, by examining the moderating role of perceived supervisor organizational status, we unveil how contextual variables can alter the scope of the damaging effects of laissez-faire leadership. This endeavor is significant as the boundary conditions associated with laissez-faire leadership are largely unknown (Walsh & Arnold, 2020). Identifying those conditions may help determine in what context laissez-faire leadership is most harmful. Third, this paper is one of the rare investigations that simultaneously examine positive and negative forms of well-being as outcomes (Inceoglu et al., 2018), which provides a more accurate understanding of the effects of leadership on employee well-being. Fourth, we demonstrate that laissez-faire leadership's impact on health outcomes differs from the effect exerted by constructive and destructive forms of leadership, thereby highlighting its specific nature. Finally, from an empirical perspective,

the present findings are based on two studies. The combination of a three-wave time-lagged design that controlled for the autoregressive effects of depressive symptoms and an experimental vignette study lends greater support for our findings. This allows for a better identification of the effects of laissez-faire leadership over time and provide an evaluation of its specific effects in an experimental situation, thereby answering the call of researchers for using more robust methodological designs in the study of leadership and well-being (e.g., Che et al., 2017; Martinko et al., 2013; Nielsen & Taris, 2019; Skakon et al., 2010).

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

### ***Laissez-Faire Leadership and Psychological Well-Being***

Because leaders play pivotal roles in organizations and influence multiple aspects of subordinates' jobs (Nielsen & Taris, 2019), leaders' behavior may impact employee psychological well-being beyond other factors such as age, health practices, support from others, and stressful events (Gilbreath & Benson, 2004). Studies focusing on the effects of leadership on employee well-being are fairly recent and, as such, much remains to be known about these effects (Inceoglu et al., 2018). While various reviews attest to the association between leadership styles and employee well-being (e.g., Inceoglu et al., 2018; Montano et al., 2017; Skakon et al., 2010), only a limited number of studies have focused on passive forms of leadership. For instance, Skakon et al. (2010)'s review conducted over three decades of leadership research indicates that the association between passive leadership and well-being was examined in only 5 of the 49 studies reviewed. More recently, of the 71 studies included in Inceoglu et al. (2018)'s review, only 3 examined passive forms of leadership such as laissez-faire leadership. Montano et al. (2017)'s comprehensive meta-analysis that reviewed literature on different groups of leadership constructs, such as destructive leadership, does not specifically focus on passive forms of leadership. To date, there is no meta-analysis conducted on the relation between passive forms of leadership and well-being (Skogstad et al., 2017). This demonstrates that knowledge on the effects of passive forms of destructive leadership on employee well-being remains relatively scarce compared to what we know about active

forms of leadership (Che et al., 2017; Skogstad et al., 2017), despite the fact that passive leadership is almost seven times more prevalent in organizations (Aasland et al., 2010). As such, more research is needed to understand the specific effects of passive forms of leadership, namely laissez-faire leadership, on health outcomes.

Characterized by avoidance and inaction (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad, Aasland et al., 2014), laissez-faire leadership is considered the most passive form of leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008). Laissez-faire leaders avoid making decisions and using their authority (Antonakis et al., 2003), deflect subordinates' requests for assistance, avoid providing direction and support (Bass, 1998), demonstrate a lack of engagement in subordinates' work (Kelloway et al., 2012), and fall short of providing feedback to subordinates (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Overall, it represents the abdication of the leader's work responsibilities (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad, Aasland et al., 2014). Theoretically and empirically, research on laissez-faire leadership found it to be ineffective (Bass & Bass, 2008) and detrimental to the interests of employees and organizations (Einarsen et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2017).

A growing body of research has reported laissez-faire leadership to be negatively associated with employee job satisfaction (Bernard & O'Driscoll, 2011; DeRue et al., 2011; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Skogstad, Aasland et al., 2014), and well-being (Kelloway et al., 2012; Zineldin & Hytter, 2012; Zwingmann et al., 2014), and to be positively related to psychological distress (Skogstad et al., 2007), burnout (Trépanier et al., 2019; Usman et al., 2020), emotional exhaustion (Kanste et al., 2007), chronic and daily stress (Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Rowold & Schlotz, 2009), headache and backache occurrence and fatigue (Zwingmann et al., 2014), injuries at work (Kelloway et al., 2006), and hair cortisol levels (Diebig et al., 2016), although there is inconsistency in the strength of the association between laissez-faire leadership and employee outcomes (Skakon et al., 2010). For instance, some studies reported a non-significant association between this passive leadership style and stress (e.g., George et al., 2017; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Because most of those findings are based on correlational or cross-sectional evidence, more research is needed to establish the true effects of laissez-faire leadership on various indicators of well-being.

Indeed, as employee well-being is a broad concept, there are multiple ways to conceptualize it (Warr, 2013). Well-being indicators can fall into different categories depending on their duration (long term vs. short term), scope of measurement (context-specific vs. general), and valence (positive vs. negative) (Kaluza et al., 2020). To examine laissez-faire leadership's enduring effects (i.e., long term), this study focuses on cognitive and relatively long-term indicators of employee well-being. Moreover, a context-free perspective is used to demonstrate that laissez-faire leadership's negative effects transcend the workplace and affect employees' everyday life. Additionally, researchers (e.g., Kaluza et al., 2020; Montano et al., 2017) have generally adopted a perspective that differentiates between (positive) well-being and ill-being as these aspects may coexist (WHO, 2004). As defined by WHO (2013a), psychological well-being reflects the absence of negative health symptoms (i.e., ill-being) and the presence of positive mental health (i.e., well-being). While positive well-being refers to optimal psychological functioning, which is the ability to flourish and cope with normal or stressful life situations, negative well-being pertains to presence of psychological symptoms and their severity (Montano et al., 2017). To achieve a full state of well-being, leaders should both ensure the absence of illness among employees and support their ability to achieve their true potential. As laissez-faire leadership may fall short of achieving both aspects of well-being among subordinates, we focus on positive mental health, the foundation for positive well-being (WHO, 2004), and depressive symptoms, one of the world leading causes in disability (WHO, 2017), to better comprehend the effects of this form of leadership on employee psychological well-being.

### ***Laissez-Faire Leadership and Positive Mental Health***

There are reasons to believe that, as a negative form of leadership, laissez-faire leadership reduces positive mental health, a context-free indicator of positive psychological well-being (Arnold et al., 2007). For instance, cross-sectional studies have reported a negative association between laissez-faire leadership and positive indicators of well-being (e.g., Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Zwingmann et al., 2014). As such, laissez-faire leadership may pose a threat to employees' feelings of happiness and their ability to flourish, to deal with life challenges, and to achieve optimal psychological and social

functioning (i.e., their positive mental health) (Hu et al., 2007).

The negative effects of laissez-faire leadership on employee health can be linked to the failure of laissez-faire leaders to carry out the basic functions of leadership (Barling & Frone, 2017). Conceptually, laissez-faire leadership is unique because its negative impact is due to lack of constructive behavior rather than enactment of destructive ones (Kelloway et al., 2006). As laissez-faire leaders fail to model appropriate behavior, the social expectations associated with the leader role are left unfulfilled, which removes structure and meaning to subordinates' behavior (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). As influential agents in the organization, leaders have important responsibilities towards their employees, such as defining roles, assisting in tasks, and allocating resources. Failing to meet these responsibilities reduces the capacity of employees to do their jobs. Indeed, when employees do not receive the information, feedback, and support they need (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019), their ability to adequately complete their work is hindered (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b), and their goal attainment (Skogstad et al., 2017) and career advancement (Dasborough, 2006) are undermined. This is why laissez-faire leadership is generally associated with a lesser sense of accomplishment (Stogdill, 1974; Stogdill & Bass, 1981). Similarly, as they do not provide guidance and recognition to employees (Schilling, 2009), laissez-faire leaders fail to be efficient motivators (Bernhard & O'Driscoll, 2011) and mentors (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Thus, laissez-faire leaders deprive employees from growth and development opportunities (Skogstad, Aasland et al., 2014), thereby hindering their ability to thrive and flourish (i.e., positive mental health) (Gilbreath & Benson, 2004; van Dierendonck et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2015).

Moreover, while active forms of leadership involve interactions with the leader, laissez-faire leaders refrain from engaging in any form of social interaction. Because behaviors that involve ignorance or neglect are less evident and their intent is unclear, their ambiguity makes them harder to address and to cope with (Robinson et al., 2013). Indeed, laissez-faire leadership is considered as an ambiguity-increasing pattern of leader behavior, which leads employees to experience high levels of uncertainty (Diebig et al., 2016). The uncertainty among subordinates who are confronted to laissez-faire leaders'

passive behaviors (Bass & Bass, 2008) can lead to employee reactions anchored in avoidance and anxiety (Ferris et al., 2016), which may negatively impact their positive mental health. Kelloway et al. (2012) explained that disengaged leaders reduce employees' trust in the leader, which would subsequently affect their well-being. Laissez-faire leaders' infrequent interactions with employees (Kanwal et al., 2019; Skogstad, Aasland et al., 2014) also reduce efficient communication (Schilling, 2009) and employees' ability to cope with challenging situations (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019), which detracts from employees' sense of coherence, a vital foundation of positive mental health (WHO, 2004). Therefore, the ambiguity and unreliability of laissez-faire leadership can create confusion and rumination about how to deal with their leader, their tasks, and their work problems, which can be detrimental to their psychological functioning (i.e., positive mental health). The above discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: Laissez-faire leadership is negatively related to employees' positive mental health.*

### ***Laissez-Faire Leadership and Depressive Symptoms***

Just as leaders' role in the development of depression remains understudied (Perko et al., 2014), laissez-faire leadership's relation to employees' depressive symptoms has also been scarcely examined. Leadership research has generally focused on burnout and emotional exhaustion (Schermyly & Meyer 2016). Since depressive symptoms affect the individual's capacity to function (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) with negative effects extending beyond the workplace (Leiter & Patterson, 2014), the role of laissez-faire leadership in the development of depressive symptoms is an important inquiry.

There is some empirical evidence which suggests that laissez-faire leaders may induce depressive symptoms among employees. For instance, a cross-sectional study found passive leadership to be negatively related to a mental health measure that included depressive symptoms (Barling & Frone, 2017). Using the tenets of conservation of resources theory, these authors suggested that passive leadership may produce work role stressors, which would lead to resource depletion and ultimately exert negative consequences on employees' mental health. Theorell et al. (2012) found that a style of



leadership conceptually close to passive leadership, self-centered leadership, predicted an increase in subordinates' depressive symptoms over time. Moreover, using cross-sectional data, Skogstad et al. (2007) reported that laissez-faire leadership bring about psychological distress, a summary construct that includes symptoms of anxiety and depression, through its effects on role stressors, conflicts with co-workers, and bullying. Taken together, these results suggest that laissez-faire leadership may contribute to employees reporting depressive symptoms through processes related to their work roles and relationships. However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has specifically focused on the effects of laissez-faire leadership on depressive symptoms.

Therefore, building on past research (e.g., Barling & Frone, 2017; Skogstad et al., 2007), laissez-faire leadership can be considered a root cause of role stressors. Indeed, laissez-faire leaders do not offer guidelines and instructions to employees about their work goals and requirements (Bass & Bass, 2008), which leads to disorganized and inefficient work (Stogdill & Bass, 1981). Laissez-faire leaders omit rewards or punishment, and therefore reinforce neither good nor bad performance (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a). As such, individuals cannot achieve their work goals properly and their leaders are unresponsive when they need help (Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014). Employees may grow resentful of their leader and develop negative emotions towards them. This can lead employees to feel frustrated, under-appreciated (Dasborough, 2006), and incompetent (Trépanier et al., 2019), contributing to the feelings of worthlessness associated with depression (Beck & Alford, 2009).

Moreover, feelings of despair, hostility, and irritability qualifying depressive symptoms may be born out of being ignored by their leader. Indeed, laissez-faire leadership may be perceived as a form of interpersonal rejection (Dasborough, 2006) or as a form of ostracism (Skogstad et al., 2007). Recent research has indeed shown that laissez-faire leadership is associated with work alienation (Usman et al., 2020), workplace ostracism (Kanwal et al., 2019), and failure to connect with the organization (Bernhard & O'Driscoll, 2011). Consequently, work relationships are affected by laissez-faire leaders, which hinders employees' health (Nielsen & Taris, 2019). Laissez-faire leadership lowers group cohesion (Stogdill, 1974; Stogdill & Bass, 1981) and individuals with less social

support may be more prone to experience depression (Howell et al., 2014). As the neglect of their leader can be hard to address (Robinson et al., 2013), it may lead employees to reduced expectations of future favorable treatment from the leader (Eisenberger et al., 2002) and to feelings of hopelessness, corresponding to depressive symptoms (Beck & Alford, 2009; Mikulincer, 1994; Seligman, 1975). As such, laissez-faire leadership may lead to the development of depressive symptoms by its negative influence on employees' roles and relationships. The above rationale leads to the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 2:* Laissez-faire leadership is positively related to employees' depressive symptoms.

Since depressive symptoms are characterized by feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness (Beck & Alford, 2009), we speculate that these symptoms may be particularly prone to appear through the long-term effect of laissez-faire leadership. Because laissez-faire leaders affect employees through their absence, they have a more diffused and lasting effect on employees (Brandebo et al., 2016). It is thus plausible that the effects of this passive form of leadership develop more slowly over time compared to those of active forms of destructive leadership, which may be more profound and short term (Skogstad, et al., 2017). As the effect of leadership on depression may take time to emerge (Schermyly & Meyer 2016), laissez-faire leadership may relate to the development of depressive symptoms in the longer term. This leads to the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 3:* Laissez-faire leadership is positively related to change in employees' depressive symptoms over time.

### ***The Moderating Role of Perceived Supervisor Organizational Status***

A more complete understanding of how laissez-faire leadership affects employee well-being can be gained by considering boundary conditions. Organizational variables are important factors that may magnify (versus reduce) the relation between laissez-faire leadership and well-being (Harms et al., 2017; Inceoglu et al., 2018; Walsh & Arnold, 2020). These factors play an important role in the way employees attach meaning to

laissez-faire leadership behavior. We posit that the extent to which supervisors are perceived to represent the organization in their words and actions (e.g., Shoss et al., 2013) is central for determining the magnitude of the harmful implications of laissez-faire leadership for employee well-being. An important way by which leaders can endorse an organizational character is when they hold a high organizational status.

Employees' perceptions of their supervisor's organizational status refer to the extent to which they perceive that the organization values their supervisor and cares about his or her well-being, and that the supervisor contributes to important organizational decisions and has authority in carrying out job responsibilities (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Supervisors with high organizational status are more likely to promote the organization's goals and values (Vandenberghe et al., 2017). As such, when supervisors are central agents of the organization, their authority and decisions would be perceived as reflecting the organization's own decisions and actions. Thus, the actions of supervisors with high organizational status are likely viewed as being sanctioned, promoted, and valued by the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2002) rather than based on their personal inclinations (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). When employees view their supervisor as closely aligned with and supported by the organization, they are more likely to make organizational attributions for the supervisor's laissez-faire leadership. For instance, Shoss et al. (2013) showed that the more employees associated their supervisor with the organization, the more they tended to blame the organization for abusive supervision. Presumably, employees perceived that their organization was responsible for their supervisor's negative treatment. Thus, employees are prone to generalize their perception of important organizational agents to the organization as a whole. In the same vein, Eisenberger et al. (2002) found that when the supervisor was perceived to have high organizational status, the relationship between perceived supervisor support and perceived organizational support was stronger. Consequently, employees' well-being may be more strongly affected by laissez-faire leadership when they perceive the supervisor as being highly regarded by the organization.

Following this logic, being negatively treated by a supervisor (e.g., through laissez-faire leadership) who exerts an important role in the organization provides little assurance

of a successful career in the organization and less fulfillment of employee needs (Shoss et al., 2013), which may contribute to further decrease employee mental health. Laissez-faire leadership practices reduce the resources available to the employees, which is exacerbated when the leader has a high status in the organization. Indeed, being neglected by a supervisor who has high status means greater loss of information, advice, opportunities, work relationships, and support (Robinson et al., 2013). Thus, powerful laissez-faire leaders would particularly deprive employees from opportunities of growth and development, thereby hindering their ability to be successful in the organization, which would detract from their mental health. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

*Hypothesis 4:* Perceived supervisor organizational status moderates the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and employees' positive mental health such that this relationship is stronger (vs. weaker) and negative when perceived supervisor organizational status is high (vs. low).

As employees attribute the laissez-faire behavior to the organization, the meaning attached to these behaviors will be exacerbated. Because the supervisor's laissez-faire behavior is perceived as being endorsed by the organization, they may feel devalued and under-appreciated by their organization itself. Being ignored and neglected by the organization may lead employees to perceive that their status as a worthwhile individual is challenged, resulting in feelings of worthlessness (Restubog et al., 2008). Moreover, as the supervisor's organizational status may act as a vindication of his or her laissez-faire behavior, statements by the supervisor regarding goals and objectives of the organization are taken as accurate and definitive. Because they are backed by the force of the organization, it may seem difficult for employees to criticize or to point out any wrongdoings from the supervisor's laissez-faire behaviors, which may persuade employees that this negative behavior will persist over time, enhancing their feelings of hopelessness. Employees may perceive that, even if they change supervisors, similar laissez-faire behavior may be enacted by others because they are valued by the organization. As such, this may enhance employees' sense of despair and their negative perception of their work environment. Thus, building on our previous arguments,

employees may develop more depressive symptoms (in the short term and over time) when they perceive their laissez-faire leader to have a high organizational status. This leads to the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 5:* Perceived supervisor organizational status moderates the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and (a) employees' depressive symptoms and (b) change in employees' depressive symptoms over time such that these relationships are stronger (vs. weaker) and positive when perceived supervisor organizational status is high (vs. low).

## **2.3 Study 1**

### ***Sample and Procedure***

Participants were recruited through the personal contacts of the research team, the alumni association's mailing list, and the university's research panel, which includes students, graduates, and alumni. Respondents understood that participation was voluntary and that they would complete three waves of online surveys on Qualtrics online platform with a time lag of 6 months between waves. Prospective participants were informed that the study was about leadership practices and employee well-being, among others, and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They were to be aged 18 or more, occupy a salaried employment, and have an identifiable supervisor. To encourage participation, respondents received a \$5 gift card upon completion of each survey. Respondents completed the French or English version of the surveys. Laissez-faire leadership, perceived supervisor organizational status, and demographics were measured at Time 1. Employees' positive mental health and depressive symptoms were measured at Time 2, while depressive symptoms were measured again at Time 3. When testing the effect of Time 1 laissez-faire leadership on Time 3 depressive symptoms, we controlled for Time 2 depressive symptoms, which allowed testing the effect of laissez-faire leadership on change in depressive symptoms (i.e., longer term or longitudinal effects: Maxwell & Cole, 2007).

Initially, 1003 participants completed the Time 1 questionnaire, among whom 3 respondents were eliminated due to careless responding (two were straight-liners and one was eliminated due to more than 50% missing responses). Excluding participants who changed supervisors or organizations over the one-year period of the study, there remained 608 usable responses at Time 1, 298 at Time 2, and 207 at Time 3. This corresponds to a 34% overall retention rate among Time 1 respondents. In the final sample, 60% of the participants worked full time, 70% had at least an undergraduate degree and 73% were female. Participants worked in various industries: retail trade (15%), health care and social assistance (10%), professional, scientific and technical services (9%), finance and insurance (8%), public administration (7%), among others. They were affiliated with small organizations (i.e.,  $\leq 100$  employees; 51%), mid-size organizations (101-1000 employees; 27%), or large organizations ( $> 1000$  employees; 22%).

To evaluate whether subject attrition led to non-random sampling over time, we used logistic regression to determine if Time 1 substantive variables and demographics and Time 2 variables influenced the probability of employees responding (1) versus not responding (0) at Time 3 (Goodman & Blum, 1996). The logistic regression model was significant ( $\chi^2(8) = 20.21, p < .05$ ). Two of our substantive variables, laissez-faire leadership ( $b = .43, p < .05$ ) and positive mental health ( $b = -.76, p < .05$ ), were significant predictors of Time 3 participation. To further probe into these effects, we followed Goodman and Blum's (1996) suggestion to examine the mean differences between the initial sample at Time 1 and the final sample at Time 3 on the significant predictors of attrition (i.e., laissez-faire leadership and positive mental health). Using *t* tests for independent samples, mean differences were .22 for laissez-faire leadership and .17 for positive mental health. These mean differences represent 4.4% and 4.3%, respectively, of the range of the 5-point Likert-type scales used to measure these variables, which should be considered as having limited practical impact (Goodman & Blum, 1996). Thus, sample attrition was not entirely random, but attrition bias was practically small. We discuss these effects in the study limitations.

## **Measures**

A translation-back-translation procedure was used to create French versions of English scales (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). Unless otherwise specified, a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), was used.

***Laissez-faire leadership.*** A 7-item version (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a, 2008b) of the laissez-faire leadership scale from the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X* (Bass & Avolio, 1991) was used at Time 1. A sample item is "At work, my supervisor avoids getting involved in handling work problems." The internal consistency for this scale was .93 in this study.

***Perceived supervisor organizational status.*** We used Eisenberger et al.'s (2002) 12-item scale to measure perceived supervisor organizational status. A typical item was "The organization supports decisions made by my supervisor." The alpha coefficient for this scale was .91.

***Positive mental health.*** We used the 6-item positively worded subscale of the *General Health Questionnaire* (GHQ-12; Goldberg, 1972; Hardy et al., 1999) to measure positive mental health (e.g., Arnold et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2007). Respondents were provided with the general instruction "Within the past few weeks ..." which was followed by the specific items of the scale. A sample item is "Have you been able to enjoy your normal day to day activities?" A 4-point response scale was used for this measure with anchors being *much less than usual* (1), *no more than usual* (2), *more than usual* (3), and *much more than usual* (4). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .89.

***Depressive symptoms.*** We used the DEPS scale from Salokangas et al. (1994; see also Vuori & Vinokur, 2005) to measure depressive symptoms at Time 2 and Time 3. While this scale comprises 10 items, one item that referred to "sleeping disorders" was dropped as it represented a somatic complaint. Thus, we retained a 9-item scale of depressive symptoms. Respondents indicated the extent to which they experienced the described depressive symptoms during the past month (e.g., "I had the feeling of a hopeless

future”) using a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). The reliability for this scale was .94 at Time 2 and .93 at Time 3.

## **2.4 Study 1: Results**

### ***Confirmatory Factor Analyses***

We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) through Mplus 7.31 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) and maximum likelihood (ML) estimation to examine the dimensionality of our constructs. As recommended in the context of longitudinal studies, the full information maximum likelihood (FIML) method was used as it integrates all the available information from the covariance matrix (i.e., from all respondents at Time 1 and subsequent times) and as such permits missing data (e.g., Enders, 2010; Fitzmaurice et al., 2004; Graham, 2009, 2012). Thus, model parameters were estimated based on the full sample ( $N = 608$ ). To reduce the complexity of our model, we created 3 and 4 parcels for Time 2 and 3 depressive symptoms and Time 1 perceived supervisor organizational status, respectively, using random assignment of items to parcels (Little et al., 2002). Moreover, the errors of parallel items for the depressive symptoms construct were allowed to correlate to reflect stable measurement error across time (Geiser, 2012). As shown in Table 1, the five-factor hypothesized model (i.e., Time 1 laissez-faire leadership, perceived supervisor organizational status, Time 2 positive mental health and depressive symptoms, and Time 3 depressive symptoms) yielded a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(220) = 601.49, p < .001, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .053$ ). This model outperformed any more parsimonious models that merged specific factors ( $p < .001$ ; Table 1). Moreover, in the five-factor model, all items/indicators significantly loaded on their respective latent constructs ( $p < .001$ ) and were sizeable (.68 to .94). These results provide support for the discriminant validity of our variables.

### ***Measurement Invariance***

As we controlled for the autoregressive effect of depressive symptoms, we sought to establish the invariance of this measure across time to ensure that any change observed from Time 2 to Time 3 was due to the effect of latent factors and not to measurement



issues (Cole & Maxwell, 2003; Little et al., 2007; Millsap, 2011). We sequentially constrained measurement specifications (e.g., loadings, thresholds, and uniquenesses) and examined whether these constraints led to significant decrements in model fit. The errors of parallel items were allowed to correlate across time (Little, 2013) to account for their systematic nature (Geiser, 2012). These analyses were conducted using maximum likelihood (ML) estimation and the FIML method. Results are reported in Table 2. As can be seen, model fit did not significantly worsen along the sequence of constraints, and the most parsimonious model (i.e., strict invariance) yielded a good fit ( $\chi^2(12) = 9.57$ , *ns*, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00, RMSEA = .000). This suggests that the measure of depressive symptoms displayed stable psychometric properties across time (Byrne et al., 1989; Cheung & Lau, 2012). Thus, the specifications of the strict invariance model for depressive symptoms were incorporated in our time-lagged analyses.

### ***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations***

Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 3. As expected, Time 1 laissez-faire leadership was negatively correlated with Time 2 positive mental health ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and Time 3 depressive symptoms ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Time 2 positive mental health was negatively related to Time 3 depressive symptoms ( $r = -.48$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### ***Hypothesis Testing***

***Hypotheses 1-3.*** The effects of Time 1 laissez-faire leadership on Time 2 positive mental health and Time 2 depressive symptoms, as well as the effect of Time 1 laissez-faire leadership on Time 3 depressive symptoms, controlling for Time 2 depressive symptoms, were tested using structural equations modeling (SEM). The model showed an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2(147) = 447.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .058). Results indicated that Time 1 laissez-faire leadership was negatively related to Time 2 positive mental health ( $B = -.27$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as predicted by Hypothesis 1. Time 1 laissez-faire leadership was negatively and significantly related to both Time 2 depressive symptoms ( $B = .24$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Time 3 depressive symptoms ( $B = .19$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ), controlling for the autoregressive effect of Time 2 depressive symptoms ( $B = .42$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results provide support for Hypotheses 2 and 3.

**Hypotheses 4 and 5.** We used the latent moderated structural equations modeling (LMS) approach (Dimitruk et al., 2007; Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000) to examine Hypotheses 4 and 5. LMS provides reliable estimates and standard errors because it accounts for measurement error (Cheung & Lau, 2017; Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017). This approach was applied using the XWITH command in Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) with the robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimator and the FIML method. Due to the non-normality of the latent moderators (Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000), fit indices that rely on such normality are not computed. Therefore, a two-step approach is recommended to test moderation effects (Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017). First, a baseline model with no interaction variable was estimated. In this model, only the direct effects of Time 1 laissez-faire leadership and perceived supervisor organizational status on the dependent variable (i.e., Time 2 positive mental health, Time 2 depressive symptoms, or Time 3 depressive symptoms) were estimated. Second, this baseline model was then compared to the moderated model where the interaction variable was added, using a log-likelihood difference test (D-2LL; Dimitruk et al., 2007) and the Akaike information criterion (AIC).

The baseline model related to the test of the moderating effect of perceived supervisor organizational status between Time 1 laissez-faire leadership and Time 2 positive mental health (Hypothesis 4) yielded a good fit ( $\chi^2(116) = 344.12, p < .001, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .057$ ) (Table 4). However, the moderated model including the interaction term proved superior to the baseline model ( $D-2LL(1) = 4.94, p < .05$ ). This augmented model did not display significant loss in information according to the AIC as AIC's value was smaller for the moderated model (17530.11) versus the baseline model (17531.37). The interaction between laissez-faire leadership and perceived supervisor organizational status significantly predicted positive mental health ( $B = -.07, SE = .03, p < .05$ ) (Table 5). Laissez-faire leadership was significantly and negatively related to positive mental health both at high levels (1 *SD* above the mean:  $B = -.20, SE = .05, p < .001$ ) and low levels (1 *SD* below the mean:  $B = -.09, SE = .04, p < .05$ ) of the moderator. However, the difference between these two relationships was significant ( $B =$

-.12,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This interaction is shown in Figure 1. Hypothesis 4 is thus supported.

The baseline model related to the test of the moderating effect of perceived supervisor organizational status between Time 1 laissez-faire leadership and Time 2 depressive symptoms (Hypothesis 5a) yielded a good fit ( $\chi^2(74) = 291.27$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .069). The moderated model including the interaction term showed a marginally significant improvement over the baseline model (D-2LL(1) = 3.05,  $p < .10$ ), and it did not display loss of information according to the AIC (moderated model: 16722.22 vs. baseline model: 16723.07) (Table 4). In the moderated model (Table 5), the interaction between laissez-faire leadership and perceived supervisor organizational status was marginally significant ( $B = .15$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .10$ ). The relationship between laissez-faire leadership and positive mental health was significantly negative both at high levels (1 *SD* above the mean;  $B = .41$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and low levels (1 *SD* below the mean;  $B = .17$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .05$ ) of perceived supervisor organizational status. These relationships differed marginally from one another ( $B = .23$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 5a is marginally supported.

Similarly, the baseline model related to the test of the moderating effect of perceived supervisor organizational status between Time 1 laissez-faire leadership and Time 3 depressive symptoms, controlling for Time 2 depressive symptoms (Hypothesis 5b), yielded a good fit ( $\chi^2(117) = 355.56$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .058). However, the moderated model including the interaction term did not improve over the baseline model (D-2LL(1) = .23, *ns*) and had a greater value for the AIC (moderated model: 17855.06 vs. baseline model: 17853.32) (Table 4). The moderated model was not retained. The effect of laissez-faire leadership on change in depressive symptoms between Time 2 and Time 3 was non-significant at high levels (1 *SD* above the mean:  $B = .13$ ,  $SE = .12$ , *ns*) and low levels (1 *SD* below the mean:  $B = .20$ ,  $SE = .09$ , *ns*) of perceived supervisor organizational status: and these effects did not differ across levels of the moderator ( $B = -.08$ ,  $SE = .16$ , *ns*) (Table 5). Hypothesis 5b is not supported.

## **2.5 Study 1: Discussion**

Study 1 findings indicate that laissez-faire leadership has negative implications for employee health by reducing positive mental health and increasing depressive symptoms over time. Results further show that the negative consequences of laissez-faire leadership on positive mental health are amplified when supervisors are perceived to hold a high organizational status, providing insights into the actions that organizations can undertake to mitigate these effects. However, the relationship of laissez-faire leadership to Time 2 (i.e., 6 months later) depressive symptoms was only marginally moderated by perceived supervisor organizational status; no moderating effect was observed for the longer-term evolution (i.e., 12 months later) of depressive symptoms. Thus, perceived supervisor organizational status was a more salient moderator of the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and positive mental health (vs. depressive symptoms). Study 2 is a vignette experiment aimed at exploring whether laissez-faire leadership as induced by an experimental manipulation exerts expected effects on employee well-being and examines whether these effects can be distinguished from those of active-positive (i.e., constructive) leadership and active-negative (i.e., abusive supervision) leadership.

## **2.6 Study 2**

Study 2 purports to provide further evidence for the effects of laissez-faire leadership on health indicators, namely positive mental health and depressive symptoms, using a randomized vignette experiment. The combination of experimental and longitudinal designs provides more compelling evidence regarding the directional relationship between variables (Spector, 2019). Our vignette experiment is intended to address some of Study 1's limitations by providing experimental evidence that laissez-faire leadership exerts effects on health indicators rather than the reverse and evaluating how its effects compare to those of constructive and destructive leadership (i.e., abusive supervision). We argue that laissez-faire leadership will impact positive mental health and depressive symptoms distinctively. Specifically, participants assigned to the laissez-faire leadership condition should experience lower well-being levels than those assigned to the constructive leadership condition. Due to its passive nature, the laissez-faire leadership

condition should however be associated with less poor well-being than the abusive supervision condition. This leads to the following hypotheses.

*Hypothesis 6:* In the laissez-faire leadership experimental condition, employees' positive mental health is (a) lower than in the constructive leadership condition but (b) higher than in the abusive supervision condition.

*Hypothesis 7:* In the laissez-faire leadership experimental condition, employees' depressive symptoms is (a) higher than in the constructive leadership condition but (b) lower than in the abusive supervision condition.

### ***Procedure and Sample***

Participants were recruited via Qualtrics online panel service and completed an online survey on the Qualtrics platform. Pre-screening procedures were used to make sure that only individuals who (1) were currently employed, (2) were 18 years old or older, and (3) had an identifiable supervisor could participate in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: laissez-faire leadership ( $N = 58$ ), constructive leadership ( $N = 59$ ), and abusive supervision ( $N = 73$ ). No missing data was found in either condition. Participants were asked to read a leadership vignette that described one of the three specific leader behaviors. To operationalize the three conditions, we used vignettes that have been developed and validated by Schyns et al. (2018).

Attention check items were added to the survey that respondents completed after reading the leadership scenarios: "What kind of meeting is it?;" "What is interrupting the meeting?;" "What is the main topic of the meeting?" (see Schyns et al., 2018). Three response options were provided for each question (e.g., Question 3: "A presentation", "A salary negotiation", and "A relational conflict"). Participants were then asked to evaluate the leader's behavior described in the vignette on laissez-faire leadership, constructive leadership, and abusive supervision. They then completed a survey including the dependent variables (see measures subsection) referring to how they felt in connection to the leader's behavior described in the vignette.

Of the 967 individuals who accessed the questionnaire, 392 did not meet our study's criteria, 341 did not respond correctly to the attention check items, 12 were speeders, and 32 did not complete the questionnaire, leaving a final sample of 190 participants (98 men, 92 women). In this final sample, average age was 42.68 ( $SD = 13.16$ ), average organizational tenure was 9.23 years ( $SD = 7.45$ ), and average tenure with the supervisor was 5.02 years ( $SD = 4.62$ ). Level of education was distributed as follows: high school (11.6%), associate (10.0%), bachelor's (42.6%), master's (28.4%), and doctorate (7.4%).

### **Measures**

The same measures of *laissez-faire leadership* ( $\alpha = .86$ ), *positive mental health* ( $\alpha = .93$ ), and *depressive symptoms* ( $\alpha = .93$ ) as in Study 1 were used. However, the response scales to both health-related measures were changed to a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). *Constructive leadership* ( $\alpha = .96$ ) was measured with the 7-item scale from Carless et al. (2000). A sample item is “[The immediate supervisor] ... gave encouragement and recognition to his or her employee”. A 9-item shortened version of Tepper's (2000) 15-item scale was used to measure *abusive supervision* ( $\alpha = .95$ ). An example of item is “[The immediate supervisor] ... blamed his or her employee to save himself embarrassment.” Both these leadership scales used a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### **Manipulation checks**

We conducted analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to examine whether the three experimental conditions differed in terms of perceptions of leadership styles. ANOVAs revealed as expected that perceptions of laissez-faire leadership ( $F(2, 187) = 23.96, p < .001$ ), constructive leadership ( $F(2, 187) = 11.23, p < .001$ ), and abusive supervision ( $F(2, 187) = 20.92, p < .001$ ) differed significantly across conditions. Specific contrasts demonstrated that perceptions of laissez-faire leadership were significantly higher in the laissez-faire leadership condition ( $M = 3.77, SD = 0.83$ ) than in the constructive leadership

( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $t(187) = 6.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and abusive supervision ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ,  $t(187) = 4.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ) conditions. Similarly, perceptions of constructive leadership were significantly higher in the constructive leadership condition ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) than in the laissez-faire leadership ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ,  $t(187) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and abusive supervision ( $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ,  $t(187) = 4.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ) conditions. Lastly, perceptions of abusive supervision were significantly higher in the abusive supervision condition ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) than in the laissez-faire leadership ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ,  $t(24) = 2.32$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and constructive leadership ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ,  $t(24) = 6.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ) conditions. These results confirm the effectiveness of the leadership vignettes used to operationalize the different leadership styles in the three experimental conditions.

## 2.7 Study 2: Results

ANOVAs demonstrated that the three leadership conditions had different levels of positive mental health ( $F(2, 187) = 10.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and depressive symptoms ( $F(2, 187) = 9.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ). More specifically, planned contrasts indicated that participants in the laissez-faire leadership condition ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) had significantly less positive mental health than those in the constructive leadership condition ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ),  $t(187) = -2.29$ ,  $p < .05$ , but more positive mental health than those in the abusive supervision condition ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ),  $t(187) = 2.07$ ,  $p < .05$ . Hypothesis 6 is supported. Additionally, participants in the laissez-faire leadership condition ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) reported higher scores on the depressive symptoms scale than those in the constructive leadership condition ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(187) = 2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ , but lower scores than those in the abusive supervision condition ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ),  $t(187) = -2.10$ ,  $p < .05$ . Hypothesis 7 is thus supported.

## 2.8 Study 2: Discussion

Study 2 examined the effects of laissez-faire leadership on positive mental health and depressive symptoms as also predicted in Hypotheses 1 and 2. To expand Study 1 findings, we tested the effects of laissez-faire leadership and contrasted them to those of constructive leadership and abusive supervision. Study 2 findings indicate that laissez-

faire leadership impacts positive and negative health outcomes distinctly from more active forms of leadership, thereby illustrating its specific relevance to health outcomes. As could be expected, results indicated that constructive leadership had a positive impact on health outcomes, while laissez-faire leadership and abusive supervision had a negative impact. Moreover, even if laissez-faire leadership has been deemed to be worse than abusive supervision by some authors (e.g., Skogstad, Aasland, et al., 2014), our results demonstrate that abusive supervision impacts employees more negatively than laissez-faire leadership—at least when it comes to predict health outcomes. This study shows that different leadership styles impact employees differently.

## **2.9 General Discussion**

Two studies demonstrated that laissez-faire leadership affects employee health by deteriorating well-being and fostering ill-being. Study 1 found laissez-faire leadership to engender reduced positive mental health and more depressive symptoms over time. Moreover, the negative effect of laissez-faire leadership on positive mental health was stronger when perceived supervisor organizational status was high. Study 2 experimentally manipulated three leadership styles (laissez-faire, constructive leadership, and abusive supervision) and examined their effects on employee well-being. Findings indicated that laissez-faire leadership induced lower positive mental health and more depressive symptoms and as predicted, this pattern was distinct from the pattern of results associated with constructive leadership and abusive supervision. Below, we outline the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

### ***Theoretical Contributions and Implications***

This paper's findings substantiate the large body of research that has been conducted on the relation between leadership variables and employee well-being (e.g., Arnold, 2017; Harms et al., 2017; Martinko et al., 2013; Montano et al., 2017; Skakon et al., 2010) and further corroborate studies that attested to the negative relation between laissez-faire leadership and well-being indicators (e.g., Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Skogstad, et al., 2007; Skogstad, Aasland et al., 2014; Trépanier et al., 2019). Particularly, this paper demonstrates that laissez-faire leadership may amplify depressive symptoms, which are



known to have pernicious consequences for employees and organizations (Johnston et al., 2019). This highlights that leadership practices may be responsible for mental health problems in the workplace. Our investigation is one of the first to demonstrate that reducing laissez-faire leadership practices may help alleviate one of the world leading causes in disability, depressive disorders.

Moreover, our research contributes to the limited number of studies that have considered both positive and negative indicators of well-being (Inceoglu et al., 2018). Our results are consistent with the idea that leaders' behavior plays a role in the etiology of both positive well-being and mental health disorders (Montano et al., 2017). The present findings are in line with previous research indicating that the absence of negative health symptoms is not equivalent to the presence of positive well-being (e.g., Kaluza et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2008). Accounting for these two aspects allows for a better understanding of health issues and promoting better designed interventions. As van Dick et al. (2017, p.1) pointed out, "rather than just trying to get people from -5 back to the 0 line, we should aim at getting them to +5".

Findings also highlight the distinctive effects and features of laissez-faire leadership, namely that it is characterized by the omission of constructive behaviors (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Kelloway et al., 2006). Thus, because laissez-faire leadership is an ineffective style of leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008), it will result in negative consequences for employee health over time, which explains why scholars (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2007; Skogstad, Aasland et al., 2014) consider this leadership style as being destructive. Our results support the notion that the effects of laissez-faire leadership are distinguishable from those associated with active forms of destructive leadership (Kelloway et al., 2006) and that it constitutes a unique form of leadership that should be studied in its own right (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad, Hetland et al., 2014).

This study broke new ground by exploring contextual boundaries associated with laissez-faire leadership, namely the extent to which the supervisor is perceived as holding an influential organizational status. In doing so, we took a step further in understanding

when supervisors are more likely to affect subordinates' well-being, an area of research scarcely examined in the past (Inceoglu et al., 2018), thereby adding to studies that have concentrated on the main effects of laissez-faire leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a). In essence, findings indicate that inaction by a supervisor is particularly damaging when supervisors are perceived to have a strong organizational status. In such situations, employees would think that this behavior is valued and supported by the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2002) and might even perceive that it is the organization itself that is inactive towards employees. As such, our findings reveal a dark side to perceiving the leader as an important organizational figure: supporting and valuing supervisors as agents who convey the organization's message would be counterproductive when supervisors engage in poor leadership behavior such as laissez-faire. This avenue of research on the downside of supporting and valuing supervisors is still in its infancy (e.g., Shoss et al., 2013) but would have major implications regarding how organizations select those supervisors possessing the profile of appropriate leaders for speaking on behalf of the organization.

Our studies examined laissez-faire leadership's contribution to well-being through a robust temporally lagged study controlling for the autoregressive effect of depressive symptoms and through a vignette experiment that compared its effects to those of constructive and destructive forms of active leadership. In doing so, we heeded the call of multiple authors (e.g., Che et al., 2017; Inceoglu et al., 2018; Martinko et al., 2013; Nielsen & Taris, 2019; Skakon et al., 2010; Skogstad et al., 2017) to examine how the relation between laissez-faire leadership and its outcomes unfolds over time and to provide stronger causality evidence for its effects. By adopting these research designs, our paper contributes to a limited line of research that has essentially produced evidence from correlational or cross-sectional data. Moreover, this approach allowed teasing out the effects of laissez-faire leadership on short-term and longer-term emergence of depressive symptoms, as both depressive symptoms six months later and *change over time* in depressive symptoms within the next six months were affected by laissez-faire leadership (e.g., Einarsen et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2017).

### ***Practical Implications***

Depression disorders affect nearly one in six employees' ability to work (American Psychological Association, 2016) and generate enormous individual, organizational and societal costs (Burke & Page, 2017; Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013; Schermuly & Meyer, 2016), estimated in hundreds of billions each year (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2017; Gangan & Yang, 2018). As all organizations are at risk (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013), it is important for practitioners to implement practices that help reduce the impact of negative leadership on employee health, which is inextricably intertwined with corporate health (Burton & WHO, 2010). As demonstrated, laissez-faire leadership has major implications on employee health, both on their ability to thrive and in their odds of depressive symptoms. To maintain optimal human functioning, organizations may want to limit laissez-faire leadership behavior among supervisors. However, managers should be advised that recognizing propensities to engage in inactive behavior from supervisors is more difficult than identifying active behavior. A 360-degree leadership assessment can help identify those supervisors who are inclined to use laissez-faire leadership. Another useful step in that direction might be to design leadership development training where managers are informed of the key aspects of laissez-faire such as delaying decisions, avoiding facing employees' problems, or being absent during tough times. Supervisors may be at times inactive and delay decisions because they lack training, and as such do not know when to act to maintain directions for employees. Thus, an adapted training device might be an important occupational health intervention (Arnold et al., 2007; Kelloway & Barling, 2010).

Furthermore, when laissez-faire leaders are perceived as important organizational figures, organizations may be perceived by employees as being responsible for this negative treatment. Thus, organizations should take action to clarify that laissez-faire behavior on the part of supervisors is not valued or accepted by the organization. An important way they can send a signal that those behaviors are not valued is by adopting rigorous selection and promotion procedures that do not place laissez-faire leaders in positions of authority. Moreover, organizations must convey in their policies and practices that they are present, supportive, and accessible, and adopt a 'hands-on approach' for their employees. They should also encourage feedback from employees regarding the expectations associated with the roles of leaders to create a shared understanding of the

accepted and desired leadership behaviors in the organization. This would help promote a culture and values that do not support laissez-faire leadership so that if employees do perceive it is adopted by a supervisor this would conflict with the organization's directions.

### ***Study Limitations and Future Research***

Our studies have some limitations. First, Study 1 used self-report measures, which raises concerns over common method variance bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nonetheless, such bias is known to be irrelevant to tests of interactive effects (Siemsen et al., 2010). Moreover, temporal separation of predictor and outcome variables, including control for the autoregressive effect of depressive symptoms typically help alleviate endogeneity effects. On the other hand, self-reports remain the best approach to capture the subjective experience of psychological well-being (Inceoglu et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017). Regarding the self-report measure of laissez-faire leadership, it is also worth noting that its validity may be reasonably good as past research has reported a strong association between self-reported and coworker-reported measures of passive leadership (Che et al., 2017). Moreover, as leaders tend to underestimate their laissez-faire behavior (Corrigan et al., 2002), subordinate reports of such behavior are preferable. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to examine if subordinate perceptions of supervisors' laissez-faire leadership converge and can be aggregated at the team level.

Second, while experimental designs can demonstrate causal effects, they may also have problems of external validity (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). In Study 2, we asked participants to imagine how working with the supervisor described in the vignette would impact their health. This approach may not fully capture the impact of leaders' behavior on employees' health over time. Nonetheless, the results of the vignette experiment and their similarity with the results of our field study lend support to our conclusions. Overall, both field and experimental studies compensate each other in terms of strengths and weaknesses (Spector, 2019), providing strong support for the specific effects of laissez-faire leadership on health outcomes over time. However, future research could use a different experimental design to create a more immersive experience for participants, such

as videos or simulations, which could be more impactful on health outcomes than written leadership vignettes.

Third, depression disorders tend to be more prevalent in females (WHO, 2017). According to Salokangas et al. (2002), such prevalence may be due to some items from depression scales being gender biased. In Study 1, as our sample comprised 73% women, one may wonder if the present findings are generalizable to the whole working population. However, one should note that gender (male vs. female) was unrelated to Time 2 and Time 3 depressive symptoms ( $r = -.04$ , *ns*, and  $r = .01$ , *ns*, respectively). Moreover, our analyses on Time 3 depressive symptoms controlled for Time 2 levels of depressive symptoms, hence examined change in depressive symptoms over time as the outcome, which considerably limits any potential confound by gender. While our Study 2 replicates some of the Study 1 results using a sample of 52% men, future field studies on laissez-faire leadership should be conducted to examine if the findings could be replaced using a more gender-balanced sample.

Fourth, attrition analyses indicated that employees reporting more laissez-faire leadership and lower positive mental health were more likely to remain in the study at Time 3. However, average scores on these predictors between those who remained and those who dropped out were practically minor (Goodman & Blum, 1996). Moreover, we used the FIML procedure to examine our model, which has more power and uses all available data from the covariance matrix ( $N = 608$ ) (Enders & Bandalos, 2001; Newman, 2009). This suggests that even though there was some (limited) attrition bias, the use of FIML considerably reduces its impact by considering all study participants, irrespective of completion or lack thereof of any particular survey over time.

Fifth, our data were collected in Canada, an individualistic country, hence findings may not be generalizable across countries (Yang & Li, 2017). People from individualistic countries may react more strongly to laissez-faire leadership as they tend to have a faster pace of life, prioritize individual goals over group goals, and are more autonomous (House et al., 2004). However, they also tend to have a higher subjective well-being. Additionally, as assertiveness, a cultural element more present in individualistic countries, contrasts

with passive behavior (Crawford, 1995), it may be hazardous for managers from these countries to engage in laissez-faire leadership because people may react to it more intensely because such leadership is not expected. Thus, even though there is evidence that laissez-faire leadership is negatively related to employee well-being in samples from various countries (Zwingmann et al., 2014), it may be worth replicating our results in different cultural contexts to examine their generalizability.

Lastly, it is plausible that employees with low well-being perceive their supervisor's behavior more negatively and as less supportive (Nielsen et al., 2008) or that employees' well-being influences supervisors' leadership behavior (van Dierendonck et al., 2004). Cross-lagged panel studies could help disentangle these mechanisms as they unfold over time. These studies could also consider how the leaders' health-related issues may cross over to followers' well-being (Nielsen & Taris, 2019) through laissez-faire leadership. Indeed, supervisor emotional exhaustion (Courtright et al., 2014) or anxiety (Nielsen et al., 2019) may result in laissez-faire behavior because the latter may represent a coping mechanism that reduces supervisors' burnout and protects them from depletion (Arnold et al., 2015). This line of research may help identify why supervisors use laissez-faire leadership and ways to reduce its occurrence in workplaces.

## **2.10 Conclusion**

As people spend a great deal of their life working—two thirds of adults spend 60 per cent of their waking hours at work (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2019)—making the workplace a healthy environment is an important priority for employees' well-being. However, employees are often exposed to ineffective leadership practices, particularly laissez-faire leadership, which was found to be one of the most prevalent forms of destructive leadership, affecting 1 out of 5 employees on average (Aasland et al., 2010). The present article shows that laissez-faire leadership by supervisors negatively affects employees' positive mental health and leads to the development of depressive symptoms over time. Moreover, the effects of laissez-faire leadership were found to differ from those exerted by constructive and destructive forms of active leadership and its effect on positive well-being was exacerbated when

supervisors were perceived to hold a strong organizational status. Given the prevalence and the pernicious effects of laissez-faire leadership, we hope the present results will encourage future research on its antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes.

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**Table 1.** Study 1: Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models

	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
1. Hypothesized five-factor solution	601.49***	220	.95	.94	.041	–	–
2. Four-factor, combining T2 and T3 depressive symptoms	1020.10***	224	.90	.88	.076	418.61***	4
3. Four-factor, combining T2 positive mental health and T2 depressive symptoms	1117.94***	224	.88	.87	.081	516.46***	4
4. Four-factor, combining T2 positive mental health and T3 depressive symptoms	1020.89***	224	.90	.88	.076	419.40***	4
5. Four-factor, combining T1 laissez-faire leadership and T1 perceived supervisor organizational status	2210.55***	224	.74	.70	.121	1609.06***	4
6. Three-factor, combining T2 positive mental health and T2 and T3 depressive symptoms	1493.27***	227	.83	.81	.096	891.78***	7
7. Two-factor, T1 laissez-faire leadership and T1 perceived supervisor organizational status vs. T2 positive mental health and T2 and T3 depressive symptoms	3102.24***	229	.62	.58	.144	2500.76***	9
9. One-factor, combining all factors	4390.75***	230	.45	.40	.172	3789.26***	10

*Note.* *N* = 608, based on full information maximum likelihood estimation. *df* = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 2.** Study 1: Tests of Measurement Invariance across Time for Employee Depressive Symptoms

	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	Model comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
Model 1: Configural invariance	5.10	5	1.00	1.00	.008	–		–
Model 2: Weak invariance (loadings)	6.36	7	1.00	1.00	.000	2 vs. 1	1.26	2
Model 3: Strong invariance (loadings, thresholds)	6.95	9	1.00	1.00	.000	3 vs. 2	0.60	2
Model 4: Strict invariance (loadings, thresholds, uniquenesses)	9.57	12	1.00	1.00	.000	4 vs. 3	2.62	3

*Note.* *N*s for depressive symptoms = 297-298 (Time 2) and 206-207 (Time 3). Full information maximum likelihood was used. *df* = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation. \**p* < .05.



**Table 3.** Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	28.26	9.32	–								
2. Gender	1.73	0.45	.04	–							
3. Organizational tenure (years)	3.66	4.89	.65**	.00	–						
4. Tenure with the supervisor (years)	2.12	2.87	.43**	-.03	.64**	–					
5. Laissez-faire leadership (T1)	2.05	0.99	.03	-.06	.08*	.11**	(.93)				
6. Perceived supervisor organizational status (T1)	3.71	0.78	-.02	.05	-.12**	.04	-.25**	(.91)			
7. Positive mental health (T2)	2.82	0.51	.20**	-.02	.18**	.08	-.23**	.09	(.89)		
8. Depressive symptoms (T2)	2.20	1.02	-.21**	-.04	-.18**	-.11	.22**	-.08	-.53**	(.94)	
9. Depressive symptoms (T3)	2.24	0.94	-.16*	.01	-.15*	-.08	.26**	-.11	-.48**	.53**	(.93)

*Note.* Correlations are based on the data available at a given time: T1 *N* = 606-608, T2 *N* = 298, T3 *N* = 207. For Gender, 1 = male, 2 = female. Cronbach's alphas are reported in parentheses.

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01.

**Table 4.** Study 1: Fit Indices for Latent Moderated Structural Equation Models

Dependant variables:	T2 Positive mental health		T2 Depressive symptoms		T3 Depressive symptoms	
	Baseline	Moderated	Baseline	Moderated	Baseline	Moderated
$\chi^2$	344.12*		291.27*		355.56*	
<i>df</i>	116		74		117	
Log likelihood	-8711.68	-8710.06	-8316.53	-8315.11	-8873.66	-8873.53
Scaling correction	1.2640	1.2530	1.2048	1.1989	1.2136	1.2121
Estimated paths <sup>a</sup>	54	55	45	46	53	54
CFI	.95		.95		.96	
TLI	.94		.94		.95	
RMSEA	.057		.069		.058	
AIC	17531.37	17530.11	16723.07	16722.22	17853.32	17855.057

Note. *N* = 608. based on data imputation through full information maximum likelihood. *df* = degrees of freedom; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

<sup>a</sup>The estimated paths row reports the number of free parameters in the output.

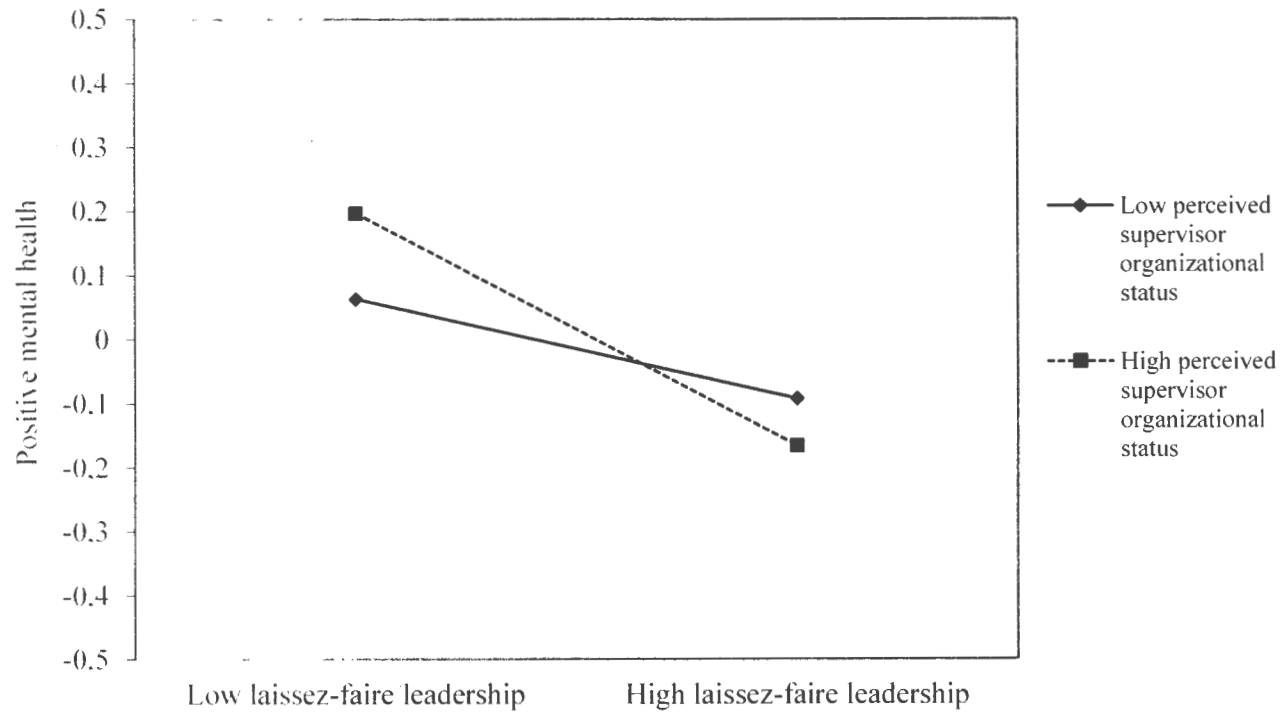
**Table 5.** Study 1: Path Analysis Results for the Moderated Models

Dependent variables: Variables	T2 Positive mental health		T2 Depressive symptoms		T3 Depressive symptoms	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
T1 Laissez-faire leadership →	-.14***	.03				
Perceived supervisor org. status →	.02	.03				
Interaction →	-.07*	.03				
T1 Laissez-faire leadership →			.29***	.08		
Perceived supervisor org. status →			-.03	.08		
Interaction →			.15†	.09		
T1 Laissez-faire leadership →					.16*	.07
Perceived supervisor org. status →					.01	.08
Interaction →					-.05	.10
T2 Depressive symptoms →					.48*	.07
<b>Moderation</b>						
High Level (+1SD)	-.20***	.05	.41***	.12	.13	.12
Mean (0)	-.14***	.03	.29***	.08	.16*	.07
Low Level (-1SD)	-.09*	.04	.17*	.09	.20*	.09
Difference (±1SD)	-.12*	.05	.23†	.14	-.08	.16

Note. *N* = 608, based on data imputation through full information maximum likelihood. *B* = unstandardized beta coefficient; *SE* = standard error; PO = perceived organizational; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3.

†*p* < .10; \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Figure 1.** Study 1 interaction between laissez-faire leadership and perceived supervisor organizational status predicting positive mental health. Relationships are shown at one 1 SD below and above perceived supervisor organizational status.



## **Chapter 3**

# **Laissez-faire Leadership and Turnover: The Role of Employee's Organizational Identity Threat**

### **Abstract**

While research has largely explored the effects of leadership on employee turnover, the mechanisms explaining the effects of passive forms of leadership, such as laissez-faire leadership, on turnover remain unexplored. As agent of liaison between employees and the organization, leaders have an important role in fostering the meaning of their employee's membership in the organization. According to social identity theory, employees develop a sense of organizational identity based on their membership to the organization. When laissez-faire leaders do not interact with their employees and neglect them, they may threaten the value of employees' membership in the organization, and as such their organizational identity. Thus, we introduce the construct of organizational identity threat to explain how laissez-faire leadership enhances turnover among subordinates. We specifically posited that laissez-faire leadership would relate to reduced employee psychological attachment (i.e., affective organizational commitment) to the organization, increased psychological detachment (i.e., turnover intentions), and increased likelihood of voluntary turnover through organizational identity threat. These predictions were tested in two studies using three-wave time-lagged designs. Study 1 ( $N = 757$ ) found that organizational identity threat mediated the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and turnover intentions and affective organizational commitment. Study 2 ( $N = 731$ ) replicated these results, while controlling for the effect of workplace isolation. Moreover, laissez-faire leadership was found to have a positive indirect effect on employee turnover through organizational identity threat. The implications of these results for laissez-faire leadership and turnover research are discussed.

**Keywords:** laissez-faire leadership; organizational identity threat; social identity theory; affective organizational commitment; turnover intentions; voluntary turnover

### 3.1 Introduction

While employee turnover has been a primary concern for organizations for over a century (Hom et al., 2017), the retention of employees represents an ever-greater competitive advantage in today's workplace. Indeed, recent market trends, such as globalization, technological advancement, and focus on knowledge work, make retention an important issue to address (Holtom et al., 2008). Moreover, turnover is known to be detrimental to organizations' successes as it affects its performance (Park & Shaw, 2013; Hancock et al., 2013) and is associated with substantial costs. According to the Work Institute 2020 retention report, employee turnover represents an ever-growing yearly cost estimated at over \$640 billion. The replacement cost is generally between 150 and 200 percent of the employee's annual salary (Cascio, 2000). Consequences of turnover extend well beyond issues related to the recruitment, selection, hiring, and training of new employees and include the loss of knowledge and social capital, overwork for co-workers, reduced customer satisfaction, and turnover contagion (Rubenstein et al., 2017). Therefore, researchers and practitioners have strived to determine what leads employees to quit (Hom et al., 2017). However, work relationships have only recently become a focus of turnover research (Jo & Ellingson, 2019) and prevailing theories have generally not focused on determinants related to leadership (Waldman et al., 2015), even though an important proportion of turnover cases can be attributed to managerial behavior (Mahan et al., 2020). Indeed, an employee's decision to stay vs. leave is considerably influenced by leadership practices. As conventional wisdom states, "people quit bosses, not jobs" (Waldman et al., 2015, p.1725). As such, the role of leaders has increasingly been a focus in turnover research.

A large stream of research has found that constructive forms of leadership, such as transformational (e.g., Tse et al., 2013; Sahu et al., 2017; Sun & Wang, 2017), empowering (e.g., Kim & Beehr, 2020), authentic (e.g., Ausar et al., 2014; Azanza et al., 2015; Laschinger & Fida, 2014), and ethical leadership (e.g., Demirtas & Akdogan, 2014; Suifan et al., 2020), and destructive forms of active leadership (e.g., Mackey et al., 2020; Schyns & Schilling, 2013), such as abusive supervision (e.g., Haar et al., 2016; Moin et al., 2020; Pradhan et al., 2019; Richard et al., 2020; Tepper, 2000) and authoritarian leadership (e.g., Wang, et al., 2018), relate to turnover. Nonetheless, there is relatively limited research that sought to understand the effects of passive forms of destructive leadership, such as laissez-faire leadership, on employee turnover. Because

passive behaviors are more frequent (Aasland et al., 2010) and affect individuals through mechanisms that are different from those associated with more active forms of negative behavior (e.g., abusive supervision) (Ferris et al., 2016), specific evaluation of the mechanisms through which laissez-faire leadership affects turnover is warranted.

By implying the abdication of one's responsibilities (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014), laissez-faire leadership is a form of non-involvement from the leader that can be characterized by avoidance or even in its extreme a form of ostracism (Ågotnes, et al., 2018). This kind of behavior from the leader, who acts as a representative of the organization (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), may have consequences for how employees' commit to the organization. The psychological relationship between employees and their organization has been widely studied through the lens of social identity theory (Tavares et al., 2016). According to this theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals develop social identities in relation to the groups and organizations they belong to. As such, their membership to the organization and the value and significance they attach to it (i.e., an employee's organizational identity) becomes a way through which they define themselves (Prati et al., 2009). We argue that laissez-faire leadership may be perceived as causing potential harm to the value, meaning, or enactment of their organizational identity, and as such can cause a threat to an employee's organizational identity (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011). When an organization-related identity is threatened, employees may have no choice but to exit the organization (Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). Therefore, we posit that perceived organizational identity threat is a potential mechanism that can explain how laissez-faire leadership increases employee turnover. To have a broad assessment of the effects of laissez-faire leadership, we evaluate its impact on two additional organization-related outcomes (e.g., Burris et al., 2008). It is known that employees leave their organization when their sense of attachment to the organization is hindered (Dutton et al., 1994) or when they feel detached from the organization (Maertz & Campion, 2004). As such, using two multi-wave studies, this paper examines the role of organizational identity threat as a mechanism by which laissez-faire leadership may reduce employees' psychological attachment (i.e., affective organizational commitment [AOC]) to the organization (Study 1 and 2), increase their psychological detachment (i.e., turnover intentions) (Study 1 and 2), and lead to voluntary turnover (Study 2) (see Figure 1).

This paper contributes to the literature in multiple ways. First, our research enhances our

understanding of the effects of laissez-faire leadership on turnover, a major outcome for organizations and employees. This endeavor is particularly important given the little that we know about the link between laissez-faire leadership and employee retention. By doing so, it provides insights into passive forms of leadership, an area of the leadership literature that lacks research and theorizing (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a). Second, by introducing the construct of organizational identity threat, we take steps to further understanding the mechanisms by which the passivity of laissez-faire leaders negatively impacts employees. Moreover, we contribute to the contemporary focus of organizational research on identity processes (Miscenko & Day, 2016; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). As such, the introduction of a new measure that specifically taps into the perceived threat to one's organizational identity has the potential to enrich research on identity threat in the organizational context (Petriglieri, 2011). Third, empirically, the present findings are based on two studies that used three-wave time-lagged designs, which makes the results particularly robust. Moreover, we controlled for workplace isolation, thereby excluding an alternative explanation to the findings, and we examined the effect of laissez-faire leadership on multiple dependent variables related to turnover (i.e., AOC, turnover intentions, and voluntary turnover). This allows examining a wide array of outcomes related to turnover and helps provide confidence to our results. The next sections present our hypotheses and research model.

## **3.2 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

### ***Laissez-Faire Leadership and Organizational Identity Threat***

Humans have the inherent need to feel as if they belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Since adults spend an important part of their day working—more than half of their waking hours (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2019)—organizations have an important role in creating a sense of belonging (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and shaping an employee's identity (Elsbach, 1999). As such, identity has become a recurrent theme in organizational studies (Miscenko & Day, 2016; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Researchers have relied on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to further understand the psychological relationship between employees and their organization (Tavares et al., 2016). It stipulates that individuals define themselves through the groups or organizations they belong to. More precisely, a social identity is the “knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance



attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p.63). Their social identity pertaining to organizational membership (i.e., organizational identity) is therefore an important cognitive variable that influences how they feel about belonging to the organization and their behavior in the organization (Prati et al., 2009).

As employees’ supervisors play an important role in their work lives, they may shape their identities (Avolio et al., 2009; Ellemers et al., 2004; Lord & Brown, 2001) and their connection to the organization (Prati et al., 2009). As leaders are agents of liaison between employees and the organization (Seers & Graen, 1984), it is their responsibility to foster this bond (Walumbwa et al., 2011). However, inadequate leadership may be a threat to an employee’s organizational identity, which we define, based on Petriglieri (2011)’s definition of identity threat, as “experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meaning, or enactment of [an employee’s organizational] identity” (p. 644).

As the most passive form of leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008), laissez-faire leadership implies the absence of employee-leader interactions. However, it is through these social interactions that employees assign value to, define, and shape the meaning of their organizational identity (Swann, 1987; Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). Laissez-faire leadership is also characterized by the avoidance, neglect, and indifference of the leader toward the needs of their followers (Skogstad et al., 2007). Being ignored from their leader, an important organizational figure, may prevent individuals from feeling acknowledged (O’Reilly et al., 2014) and hinder the sense of meaningfulness and connection associated with their organizational identity (Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). Thus, this lack of interaction, attention, and support from the leader can devalue an employee’s sense of belonging in the organization. As such, when leaders neglect and/or avoid their employees (i.e., laissez-faire leadership), it can threaten an employee’s organizational identity. This leads to the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 1: Laissez-faire leadership is positively related to an employee’s perceived organizational identity threat.*

### ***Laissez-Faire Leadership and Organization-Related Attitudes and Intentions***

Negative behaviors from leaders will persist until either the relationship is terminated or the leader changes their behavior (Tepper, 2000). However, laissez-faire leaders may not act intentionally or be aware of these behaviors (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a). As such, it is possible that the only option available to employees is to leave the organization. Therefore, one strategy to solve the resulting identity threat that may be induced by laissez-faire leadership and lower the harm it may cause is to distance oneself from the organization associated with this identity (White et al., 2018). Because threat reduction may be impossible to achieve when remaining a member of the organization (Leavitt & Sluss, 2015), employees may feel forced to restructure their identity and leave the organization (Petriglieri, 2011). Defined as the cessation of membership in an organization (Mobley, 1982) or the movement out of an organization (Coomber & Barriball, 2007), turnover has indeed been related to identity threat (Trevor & Nyberg, 2008; Petriglieri, 2011). Employees generally leave their organization when they feel distanced or detached from their organization (Ellemers et al., 2002; Maertz & Campion, 2004). As such, it has been studied in conjunction with two related job attitudes, namely (a) psychological attachment (i.e., AOC) and (b) psychological detachment (i.e., turnover intentions) (e.g., Burriss et al., 2008) from the organization.

#### ***(a) Laissez-Faire Leadership and Affective Organizational Commitment***

Organizational commitment is defined as the psychological bond between employees and their organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Although it is considered a multidimensional construct, including affective, normative, and continuance commitment, most research attention has been given to the affective component (e.g., Shepherd et al., 2011; Vandenberghe et al., 2004). Indeed, AOC is known as the most impactful component of commitment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001) and robust predictor of work behaviors (Lavelle et al., 2007). AOC implies a strong emotional relationship to and psychological attachment with one's organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990), which entails that employees remain in the organization because they want to and enjoy their organizational membership (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer et al., 2004). Therefore, AOC has been negatively associated with turnover (Stinglhamber et al., 2002; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003; Vandenberghe & Bentein, 2009).

As a psychological attachment of the employee toward the organization, AOC is bound to relate to how employees feel about belonging to the organization (i.e., an employee's

organizational identity). Thus, when the leader invalidates their organizational membership, it may have negative implications for employees' AOC. Indeed, this threat to their identity causes harmful and negative effects on individuals (Petriglieri, 2011). When employees perceive that their organizational identity loses its meaning, they may feel unvalued or unappreciated. As individuals value an identity that sustains their sense of self-worth (Gecas, 1982), they may take less satisfaction out of maintaining their organizational membership, hindering their emotional relationship with the organization (i.e., AOC). Indeed, this threat to their organizational identity may foster a negative perception of the organization (Dutton et al., 1994). When the importance of their organizational identity is threatened, employees may disengage from this identity, which may lead to lower levels of commitment (Wiesenfeld, 1997). Thus, as laissez-faire leaders threaten employees' organizational identity, they may subsequently hinder their psychological attachment to the organization and their desire to remain in the organization. Therefore, we posit that employees' organizational identity threat is a mechanism that can explain the negative impact of laissez-faire leadership on AOC.

*Hypothesis 2:* Employees' organizational identity threat mediates a negative relationship between laissez-faire leadership and affective organizational commitment.

### ***(b) Laissez-Faire Leadership and Turnover Intentions***

Defined as planning and thinking of quitting, turnover intentions reflect a cognitive process that involves the psychological detachment of employees from their organization (Griffeth et al., 2000; Tett & Meyer, 1993). It is known to be highly associated with actual voluntary turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000; Tse et al., 2013; Purba, et al., 2016; Waldman et al., 2015). Indeed, the tenets of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991, 2011) state that turnover intentions (i.e., withdrawal cognitions) are the most important predictor of voluntary turnover (i.e., the actual behavior) (Lee et al. 2017; Tse et al., 2013; Griffeth et al., 2000).

When individuals attempt to cope with identity threat, they may feel the need to distance themselves from the organization and engage in the cognitive process of quitting (White et al., 2018). Organizational identity threat may create a psychological detachment from the organization and foster thoughts of exiting the organization (Petriglieri, 2011). As laissez-faire leaders threaten employees' organizational identity, their organizational membership will be devalued, its meaning

will be rendered unsustainable, and the future enactment of this identity will be limited or hindered (Petriglieri, 2011). Therefore, if employees feel less confident about their future as members of the organization, they may feel more open to alternative employment opportunities and are more likely to exit the organization. Indeed, when employees perceive that they are being distanced and excluded from their group, they may prepare themselves to leave the group (Ellemers et al., 2002). Consequently, when laissez-faire leaders devalue and threaten their employees' organizational identity, employees may have more frequent thoughts of quitting the organization. As such, employees' organizational identity threat may be a mechanism by which laissez-faire leadership can enhance turnover intentions. This leads to the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 3:* Employees' organizational identity threat mediates a positive relationship between laissez-faire leadership and turnover intentions.

### **3.3 A Pilot Study of the Organizational Identity Threat Scale**

We developed six items to capture an employee's organizational identity threat based on Petriglieri (2011)'s conceptualization of identity threat, which posits that a threat devalues the identity, affects its meaning, and limits or prevents the enactment the identity. These elements are reflected in the scale. The items of the scale are as follows: "I feel that my identity as a member of this organization has little value;" "I think that my belonging to this organization is not sustainable;" "My identity as a member of this organization has no more sense;" "I do not feel always valued through my belonging to this organization;" "My belonging to this organization is not encouraged;" and "I have the sense that my role as a member of this organization loses its meaning." In this pilot study, we assessed the psychometric properties (i.e., reliability, factor structure, convergent and discriminant validity) of the scale. Based on our theorizing, we posited that employees' organizational identity threat would be negatively related to affective organizational commitment, job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, and leader-member exchange, and positively related to workplace isolation.

#### **Method**

##### *Procedure and Sample*

Participants were recruited from multiple customer service departments located in Eastern

Canada. They were informed that their responses would be confidentially treated. Employees were given a \$5 gift card for their participation. Questionnaires were completed in French. The study was cross-sectional, with participants completing a survey including the organizational identity threat scale along with several other, related constructs (affective organizational commitment, job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, leader-member exchange, workplace isolation) to examine its convergent and discriminant validity. We obtained a final sample of 201 respondents, among whom 52% were men and 80% working full time. Average age was 33.45 years ( $SD = 6.68$ ), average organizational tenure was 2.82 years ( $SD = 2.80$ ), and average tenure with the supervisor was 1.98 years ( $SD = 1.78$ ). Education level was distributed as follows: high school degree (9%), collegial degree (23%), undergraduate degree (29%), and master's degree or above (39%).

### **Measures**

Scale items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), except for the scale of job satisfaction, which was measured using a 7-point agreement scale. French versions of the scales were developed using a translation-back-translation procedure (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003).

**Leader-member exchange (LMX).** Liden and Maslyn's (1998) 12-item measure of LMX was used ( $\alpha = .87$ ). A sample item is "My supervisor is the kind of person one would like to have as a friend."

**AOC.** A French, adapted version (e.g., Bentein et al., 2005) of Meyer, Allen, and Smith's (1993) 6-item AOC scale was used ( $\alpha = .94$ ). A sample item is "I feel emotionally attached to this organization."

**Workplace isolation.** Marshall et al.'s (2007) 6-item scale was used to measure workplace isolation ( $\alpha = .92$ ) (e.g., "I have people I can turn to at work" [reverse coded item]).

**Perceived organizational support.** Eisenberger et al.'s (1997) 6-item version of Eisenberger et al.'s (1986) Survey of Perceived Organizational Support was used ( $\alpha = .90$ ). A sample item is "The organization really cares about my well-being."

**Job satisfaction.** A 3-item scale from Judge, Locke, Durham, and Kluger (1998), which was adapted from Brayfield and Rothe (1951), was used to measure job satisfaction (e.g., "I feel

a great sense of personal satisfaction when I do my job well”) ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

## Results

The internal consistency of the organizational identity threat scale was .92, exceeding the recommended cutoff of .70 (Hinkin, 1998; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Moreover, using principal component analysis, a single factor accounted for 73% of the variance among the items, which is above the 60% threshold recommended by Hinkin (1998). Item loadings ranged from .77 to .90 with a mean of .85, exceeding the recommended cutoff of .40 (Hinkin, 1998). These results support the unidimensional nature of the organizational identity threat scale.

We assessed the convergent and discriminant validity of organizational identity threat by examining its associations to related constructs (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Hinkin, 1998). Significant correlations were found between organizational identity threat and these constructs. Organizational identity threat was negatively related to affective organizational commitment ( $r = -.43, p < .01$ ), job satisfaction ( $r = -.24, p < .01$ ), perceived organizational support ( $r = -.43, p < .01$ ), and leader-member exchange ( $r = -.31, p < .01$ ), and positively related to workplace isolation ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ). The discriminant validity of organizational identity threat was examined using confirmatory factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus. As shown in Table 1, the theorized six-factor CFA model including organizational identity threat, AOC, job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, leader-member exchange, and workplace isolation yielded a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(644) = 1116.18, p < .001$ , CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .060. All constructs were defined by as first-order factors, except LMX that was modelled as a second-order factor to reflect its four dimensions: affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Using chi-square difference tests that compared the theoretical model to more parsimonious models that merged organizational identity threat to each of the related constructs indicated that all alternative five-factor models were outperformed by the theoretical model ( $p < .001$ ). Overall, these results suggest that organizational identity threat is empirically distinguishable from AOC, job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, leader-member exchange, and workplace isolation.

### 3.4 Study 1

## Method

### *Procedure and Sample*

Data were collected through the Global Experience Panel (<https://www.panelexperienceglobale.com/>). Participants were recruited in four manufacturing organizations in Eastern Canada. Participants were advised that completion of the questionnaire would constitute evidence of consent to participate. They were also informed that their responses would remain confidential and that the study involved three waves of online surveys with a time lag of three months between waves. A French and an English version of the surveys were available for participants. Employees from different departments (e.g., sales, IT, operations, production, R&D, etc.) completed the survey.

A total of 757 employees completed the survey at Time 1, 337 at Time 2 (45% response rate), and 251 at Time 3 (74% response rate), for an overall response rate of 33%. Most respondents were permanent employees (98%) who worked full-time (97%). The sample was 74% male, 25% female, and 1% other. The average age of participants was 45.00 years ( $SD = 11.99$ ), the average organizational tenure was 12.94 years ( $SD = 10.43$ ), and the average tenure with the supervisor was 4.70 years ( $SD = 5.05$ ). Education level was distributed as follows: high school degree or lower (41%), collegial or professional degree (42%), undergraduate degree (12%), and Master's degree or above (4%). They occupied different types of jobs, such as blue-collar (42%), white-collar (18%), technical jobs (14%), professional jobs (18%), and managerial jobs (9%). Thirty-one percent of the respondents had supervisory responsibilities and 31% had direct contact with clients.

*Attrition analyses.* To examine whether participant attrition was random across time, we conducted a logistic regression analysis to determine if Time 1 and Time 2 variables including demographics (i.e., age, gender, organizational tenure, dyadic tenure) predicted the probability of participants responding (1) vs. not responding (0) at Time 3 (Goodman & Blum, 1996). The logistic regression model was non-significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 11.08$ , *ns.*, and none of the substantive variables were predictors of participation at Time 3. However, gender was significant ( $B = -.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Additional analyses indicated that 30.5% of men vs. 38.5% of women remained in the sample at Time 3. While none of our substantive variables were predictive of Time 3 participation, this may indicate that attrition was not completely random, which is discussed in the study limitations.

## **Measures**

French versions of English scales were created using the translation-back-translation procedure (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). A 7-point Likert-type scale was used for all variables, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), except if otherwise stated.

***Laissez-faire leadership.*** Based on the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X* (Bass & Avolio, 1991), a 7-item version (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a, 2008b) of the laissez-faire leadership scale was used at Time 1. “At work, my supervisor does not take necessary actions to solve work problems” is an example of items from this scale, which had an internal consistency of .90.

***Organizational identity threat.*** The 6-item scale based on Petriglieri’s (2011) conceptualization of identity threat and tested in the pilot study was used to measure organizational identity threat at Time 2. The internal consistency of this scale in this study was .93.

***AOC.*** Meyer, Allen, and Smith’s (1993) 6-item scale, which was adapted by Bentein et al. (2005), was used to measure affective organizational commitment at Time 3. Items (e.g., “I am proud to belong to this organization”) were rated using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of the scale was .92.

***Turnover intentions.*** Turnover intentions were assessed at Time 3 using a 3-item scale developed by Hom and Griffeth (1991) (see also Jaros, 1997). A sample item is “I often think about quitting this organization.” This scale displayed a reliability of .92.

## **3.5 Study 1: Results**

### ***Confirmatory Factor Analyses***

The dimensionality of our variables was examined using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with Mplus 7.31 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) and the maximum likelihood (ML) estimator. The *Full Information Maximum Likelihood* (FIML) method was used to deal with missing data. This method is recommended in longitudinal studies because it uses all the available information from the covariance matrix (i.e., from all respondents at Time 1 and subsequent times) to estimate model parameters (Enders, 2010; Fitzmaurice et al., 2004; Newman, 2009). Using a nested sequence



approach (Bentler & Bonett, 1980), our 4-factor model (i.e., Time 1 laissez-faire leadership, Time 2 organizational identity threat, Time 3 affective organizational commitment, and turnover intentions) was compared to more parsimonious models that merged specific factors. As shown in Table 2, the hypothesized model showed a good fit,  $\chi^2(203) = 357.76, p < .001, CFI = .98, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .032$ . It proved to be superior to all other models ( $p < .001$ ), for instance a model that merged AOC with turnover intentions ( $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 344.73, p < .001$ ) or organizational identity threat with both AOC and turnover intentions ( $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 856.41, p < .001$ ). Additionally, standardized factor loadings ranged from .61 to .96 and all items significantly loaded on their respective construct ( $p < .001$ ). Overall, these results support the distinctiveness of our variables.

### ***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations***

Correlations, descriptive statistics, and reliability estimates are shown in Table 3. As expected, laissez-faire leadership was positively related to organizational identity threat ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ), turnover intentions ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ), and was negatively related to AOC ( $r = -.21, p < .01$ ). Moreover, organizational identity threat was positively related to turnover intentions ( $r = .53, p < .01$ ) and negatively related to AOC ( $r = -.66, p < .01$ ).

### ***Hypothesis Testing***

Hypotheses were tested using structural equations modeling (SEM) with the robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimator and the FIML method. The indirect effects of laissez-faire leadership on turnover intentions and AOC through organizational identity threat were tested using bias-corrected bootstrap analyses with 5,000 resamples of the data and the ML estimator. This method provided confidence intervals (CIs; MacKinnon et al., 2004) to evaluate the significance of the indirect effects of laissez-faire leadership.

The theoretical model yielded a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(203) = 278.72, p < .001, CFI = .98, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .022$ . Supporting Hypothesis 1, results indicate that laissez-faire leadership had a significant and positive association with organizational identity threat ( $B = .37, SE = .09, p < .001$ ). Moreover, organizational identity threat was negatively related to Time 3 AOC ( $B = -.33, SE = .04, p < .001$ ) and positively related to Time 3 turnover intentions ( $B = .53, SE = .09, p < .001$ ). Bootstrap analyses found that laissez-faire leadership had an indirect effect on AOC ( $B = -$

.12,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [-.194, -.062]) and turnover intentions ( $B = .20$ ,  $SE = .06$ , 95% CI [.095, .326]) through organizational identity threat, confirming Hypotheses 2 and 3. Incidentally, the direct effect of laissez-faire leadership on AOC ( $B = -.03$ ,  $SE = .05$ , *ns*) and turnover intentions ( $B = .05$ ,  $SE = .10$ , *ns*) was non-significant.

### **3.6 Study 1: Discussion**

Results of Study 1 found that laissez-faire leadership has a negative indirect effect on AOC and a positive indirect effect on turnover intentions. Findings showed that organizational identity threat acts as a mediator in those relationships. Thus, laissez-faire leadership may contribute to employee turnover because employees perceive a threat to their organizational identity under this kind of leadership. The use of a three-wave time-lagged design strengthened the conclusions of our findings, while demonstrating the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership on both an employee's psychological attachment to the organization and psychological detachment from the organization over time. However, to fully demonstrate the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership on turnover through an employee's organizational identity threat, we extend our evaluation of these important organization-related attitudes and intentions to also include voluntary turnover as a dependent variable in our Study 2's model (see Figure 1).

### **3.7 Study 2**

#### **Overview**

Study 2 aims to replicate Study 1 results. Moreover, we controlled for an alternative mechanism by which employees may feel that their organizational identity is threatened, namely workplace isolation. As we argue that the neglect and ignorance from the leader may lead to employees' organizational identity threat, it is plausible that a perception of isolation from others at work, such as being isolated from co-workers and the organization (Marshall et al., 2007), contributes to this threat. Indeed, in addition to interactions with their supervisor, employees interact with other members of the organization, which can also be appraised as being threatening if things go wrong (Petriglieri, 2011). Moreover, social support (Humphrey et al., 2007), relationships with co-workers (Jo & Ellingson, 2019) and felt ostracism (Fiset et al., 2017) can also influence turnover. A unique contribution of Study 2 is that in addition to examining the indirect

effects of laissez-faire leadership on employees' AOC and turnover intentions, we also examined its indirect effect on actual turnover through organizational identity threat. As such, we propose the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 4:* Employees' organizational identity threat mediates a positive relationship between laissez-faire leadership and employee voluntary turnover.

## **Method**

### ***Procedure and Sample***

Participants were recruited through the university's research panel, which includes students, graduates, and alumni, as well as through the personal contacts of the research team. They were invited to participate in a study on leadership and job attitudes, among others, were informed that participation was voluntary, and that responses would remain confidential. The study involved three waves of online surveys using a six-month interval between waves to be answered on Qualtrics online platform. French or English versions of the questionnaires were available for respondents, who were given a \$5 gift card for completing surveys at each measurement time. Laissez-faire leadership and demographics were measured at Time 1, organizational identity threat at Time 2, and the dependent variables (i.e., affective commitment and turnover intentions) at Time 3. We obtained turnover data from participants between Time 2 and Time 3.

Of the 1003 participants who completed the Time 1 questionnaire, 3 respondents were excluded due to careless responding (i.e., straight liners and missing responses). To estimate the indirect effects of laissez-faire leadership on AOC and turnover intentions, we excluded participants who changed organizations between Time 1 and Time 3 ( $N = 269$ ), leaving 731 participants at Time 1, 421 at Time 2, and 297 at Time 3 (i.e., a 41% overall response rate). To estimate the indirect effect of laissez-faire leadership on voluntary turnover, participants who changed organizations between Time 1 and Time 2 ( $N = 180$ ) and those who left their organization for involuntary reasons between Time 2 and Time 3 ( $N = 17$ ) were excluded, while the 72 participants who voluntarily left their organization between Time 2 and Time 3 were retained. This resulted in a usable sample of 803 participants at Time 1, 493 at Time 2, and 374 at Time 3 (i.e., a 47% overall response rate). Of the 803 participants, 72.5 % were women and 60% worked full-time. Average age was 28.14 years ( $SD$

= 9.16), average tenure in the organization was 3.65 years ( $SD = 5.07$ ), and average tenure with the supervisor was 1.97 years ( $SD = 2.85$ ). Education level was distributed as follows: high school degree (6%), college degree (21%), undergraduate degree (54%), and master's degree or above (19%). They worked in various industries such as retail trade (16%), health care and social assistance (10%), finance and insurance (9%), professional, scientific, and technical services (8%), and public services (7%), among others.

**Attrition analyses.** Logistic regression was used to examine whether attrition over time was randomly distributed (Goodman & Blum, 1996). The logistic regression model for the sample used for predicting turnover ( $N = 803$ ) was non-significant ( $\chi^2(6) = 7.58, ns$ ) and none of the substantive variables were predictors of participation at Time 3, which indicates random attrition over time. A parallel analysis on the sample used for predicting the indirect effects of laissez-faire leadership on AOC and turnover intentions ( $N = 731$ ) revealed that Time 1 laissez-faire leadership significantly predicted participation at Time 3 ( $B = .32, p < .05$ ) despite the model being non-significant ( $\chi^2(6) = 11.66, ns$ ). This indicates that participants who reported more laissez-faire leadership from their supervisor at Time 1 were more likely to remain in the sample at Time 3. Following Goodman and Blum's (1996) procedure, we conducted a  $t$  test for independent samples on laissez-faire leadership scores among those who remained vs. dropped from the Time 3 sample. This analysis revealed that laissez-faire leadership at Time 1 had an average score of .16 higher among those who remained at Time 3 vs. those who did not, which corresponds to only 3.2% of the 5-point Likert scale. Thus, while participant attrition may not be completely random, its practical impact may be limited. This aspect is further discussed in the limitations.

### **Measures**

The same measures of *laissez-faire leadership* ( $\alpha = .93$ ), *organizational identity threat* ( $\alpha = .94$ ), *AOC* ( $\alpha = .90$ ), and *turnover intentions* ( $\alpha = .91$ ) were used as in Study 1. However, contrary to Study 1, which used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, these scales were measured using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

**Voluntary turnover.** Voluntary turnover between Time 2 and Time 3 was coded as a binary outcome [0 = stay ( $n = 302$ ); 1 = voluntary left ( $n = 72$ )]. The voluntary turnover rate was 19.3%.

**Control variable.** Workplace isolation from others at work was measured using the 6-item scale from Marshall et al. (2007) ( $\alpha = .94$ ), which was assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is “I have co-workers available whom I can depend on when I have a problem at work” (reverse coded). However, as the inclusion of this variable as a control in the analyses did not change the results, findings are reported without inclusion of this variable, as is recommended (e.g., Becker et al., 2016).

### 3.8 Study 2: Results

#### *Confirmatory Factor Analyses*

CFA conducted with Mplus 7.31 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010), using the ML estimator, and the FIML method found that the four-factor model including our continuous variables (i.e., Time 1 laissez-faire leadership, Time 2 organizational identity threat, Time 3 affective organizational commitment, and turnover intentions) yielded a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(203) = 792.49, p < .001$ , CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .063. As shown in Table 4, the hypothesized model displayed a better fit than any more parsimonious models ( $p < .001$ ). Moreover, all factor loadings were sizeable (ranging from .57 to .92) and significant ( $p < .001$ ). These results support the discriminant validity of our variables.

#### *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Descriptive statistics and correlations ( $N = 803$ ) are shown in Table 5. Laissez-faire leadership was positively related to organizational identity threat ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ), and negatively related to AOC ( $r = -.17, p < .01$ ). Surprisingly, laissez-faire leadership was unrelated to turnover intentions ( $r = .09, ns$ ) and negatively related to voluntary turnover ( $r = -.16, p < .01$ ). Organizational identity threat was positively related to turnover intentions ( $r = .29, p < .01$ ), and voluntary turnover ( $r = .15, p < .01$ ), and negatively related to AOC ( $r = -.27, p < .01$ ).

#### *Hypothesis Testing*

To test our model with AOC and turnover intentions as outcomes, as in Study 1, structural equations modeling, the MLR estimator, and the FIML method were used. However, the model examining the indirect effect of Time 1 laissez-faire leadership on Time 3 voluntary turnover

through organizational identity threat used the weighted least squares means and variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimator because this model used a binary outcome (i.e., voluntary turnover). Bias-corrected bootstrap analyses with 5,000 resamples of the data, the ML estimator, and CIs were also used to evaluate the significance of indirect effects. As described above, hypotheses pertaining to the indirect effects of Time 1 laissez-faire leadership on Time 3 AOC and turnover intentions were tested using a sample size of 731 while the hypothesis testing the indirect effect of Time 1 laissez-faire leadership on Time 3 voluntary turnover was tested using a sample size of 803. Table 6 presents a summary of the results of the different mediated models.

*Hypotheses 1-3.* The mediation model linking Time 1 laissez-faire leadership to Time 3 AOC and Time 3 turnover intentions through Time 2 organizational identity threat yielded a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(203) = 698.99, p < .001$ , CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .058. Time 1 laissez-faire leadership had a significantly positive effect on Time 2 organizational identity threat ( $B = .37, SE = .06, p < .001$ ), which supports Hypothesis 1. Time 2 organizational identity threat had significant effects on both Time 3 AOC ( $B = -.43, SE = .07, p < .001$ ) and turnover intentions ( $b = .47, SE = .09, p < .001$ ). Time 1 laissez-faire leadership did not have direct effects on Time 3 AOC ( $B = -.03, SE = .06, ns$ ) and turnover intentions ( $B = -.06, SE = .07, ns$ ). Bootstrap analyses showed that laissez-faire leadership had a significantly negative indirect effect on Time 3 AOC ( $B = -.16, SE = .03, 95\% CI [-.230, -.099]$ ) and a significantly positive indirect effect on Time 3 turnover intentions ( $B = .18, SE = .04, 95\% CI [.102, .265]$ ) through Time 2 organizational identity threat. These results support Hypotheses 2 and 3.

*Hypothesis 4.* The mediation model predicting Time 3 actual turnover, which was examined through the MLR estimator, yielded a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(75) = 167.41, p < .001$ , CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .039. As predicted by Hypothesis 1, Time 1 laissez-faire leadership had a significantly positive effect on Time 2 organizational identity threat ( $B = .37, SE = .06, p < .001$ ). Moreover, Time 2 organizational identity threat had a significantly negative effect on Time 3 voluntary turnover ( $B = .24, SE = .07, p < .001$ ). Results from bootstrap analyses demonstrated that Time 2 organizational identity threat mediated a positive indirect effect of Time 1 laissez-faire leadership on Time 3 voluntary turnover ( $B = .24, SE = .07, 95\% CI [.079, .333]$ ). These results support Hypothesis 4. Interestingly, Time 1 laissez-faire leadership had a negative direct effect on Time 3 voluntary turnover ( $B = -.29, SE = .08, p = .001$ ).

### 3.9 General Discussion

Results of two studies found that employees' organizational identity threat mediates the indirect effects of laissez-faire leadership on various turnover-related outcomes. Study 1 demonstrated that laissez-faire leadership had an indirect negative effect on AOC and an indirect positive effect on turnover intentions through employees' organizational identity threat. Study 2 replicated these findings while controlling for the effect of an alternative mechanism, namely workplace isolation. Moreover, we extended these results by demonstrating that employees' organizational identity threat also mediated the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and voluntary turnover. Overall, findings support the idea that employees' organizational identity threat may explain why laissez-faire leadership ultimately leads to employee turnover, which we now discuss in more detail.

#### *Theoretical Contributions and Implications*

This paper contributes to a large amount of research that has substantiated the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership on organizational outcomes (e.g., Skogstad, et al., 2007; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014). Moreover, we contribute to the literature that has attested to the importance of supervisors' role in employee turnover (e.g., Rubenstein et al., 2018; Tse et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2018). While turnover intentions, AOC, and voluntary turnover have been largely examined in leadership studies, the effects of laissez-faire leadership on these outcomes remain relatively scarcely studied. Thus, we provide additional evidence to the limited line of research that has studied the effects of laissez-faire leadership on AOC (e.g., Bučiūnienė & Škudienė, 2008; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020; Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016) and the effects of passive leadership on turnover intentions (e.g., Fosse et al., 2020; Wang & Yen, 2015). To the best of our knowledge, the specific relation between laissez-faire leadership and turnover behavior has not been examined, making this study one of the first to strive to understand how these effects take place over time.

Additionally, our study contributes to the literature by proposing employees' organizational identity threat as an underlying mechanism that accounts for the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and turnover. This highlights how neglect and ignorance from leaders can impact employees and organizations and the importance of identity-related processes in explaining turnover. In a recent meta-analysis (Rubenstein et al., 2018), while leadership was found to be an

important antecedent of turnover, identity-related processes were not included. However, there is some evidence that these processes (i.e., identification) can act as mediators between constructive forms of leadership and turnover intentions (e.g., Azanza et al., 2015; Suifan et al., 2020). The construct of employees' organizational identity threat helps further understand how identity may play a role in the relationship between destructive forms of leadership and turnover. This line of research is aligned with the recent focus on identity processes in an organizational context (Miscenko & Day, 2016; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Moreover, our study introduced and developed a new measure aimed at capturing organizational identity threat. By building a measure for this construct, we provide an opportunity for future research to further address the issues of identity threat in organizations, a line of research that has been mostly limited to experimental or qualitative studies (Petriglieri, 2011).

Interestingly, when testing the indirect effects of laissez-faire leadership on voluntary turnover through employees' organizational identity threat (Study 2), the results indicated that the direct effect of laissez-faire leadership on voluntary turnover was negative. This finding is surprising considering that, excluding very limited evidence (e.g., Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020; Ryan & Tipu, 2013; Yang & Li, 2017), research overwhelmingly shows that laissez-faire leadership has negative consequences for both employees and organizations (Bass & Bass, 2008). However, recent research has argued that there might be a close relationship between laissez-faire leadership and positive leadership constructs such as delegation (Norris et al., 2021) and empowering leadership (Wong & Giessner, 2018). Thus, when employees do not feel that the value or the meaning of their organizational membership is threatened (i.e., organizational identity threat) by their laissez-faire leader, it is possible that they might enjoy the sense of autonomy provided by this "hands-off" approach and the transfer of decision-making it implies (Norris et al., 2021). Consequently, they may wish to remain in the organization. While these constructs are theoretically distinct, in practice, the distinction between these types of leadership behavior is unclear. Hence, the positive residual effect on turnover may be explained by the fact that laissez-faire leadership may be (partly) perceived by employees as being similar to delegation or empowering leadership. Wong and Giessner (2018) explained that the negative impact of laissez-faire leadership is dependent on the perceptions and the expectations of employees. When their empowerment expectations match their leader's behavior, they perceive these behaviors as an expression of empowering leadership, but when their expectations do not match these behaviors, they perceive



them as an expression of laissez-faire leadership. Moreover, Norris et al. (2021) demonstrated that delegation may be perceived as laissez-faire leadership, depending on the subordinate's gender and the leader's competence trustworthiness. Thus, it may also be that laissez-faire leadership is perceived as positive in certain situations (e.g., Yang & Li, 2017). Our results indicated that this may be true when leaders fulfilled their responsibilities as agents of liaison between the employees and the organization and do not hinder the value, the meaning, and the enactment of employees' organizational identity, making employees less likely to exit the organization. As such, this research provides an interesting avenue for future research by addressing the conceptual discourse surrounding laissez-faire leadership (e.g., Yang, 2015) and pondering on the question: "When should the leader back off and allow the subordinates to carry on without him/her?" (de Vries, et al., 2002, p.133).

Lastly, the use of two studies with three-wave time-lagged designs offer strong support to our conclusions. The replication of our results in two different samples, one from the manufacturing industry and another from diverse industries, suggests that these results are generalizable to a wide working population. Moreover, our control for workplace isolation as an alternative mechanism explaining organizational identity threat and turnover in Study 2 highlights the importance of the leader for employees' connection to the organization. This is consistent with research showing that negative behaviors are more consequential when they come from the supervisor than from co-workers because employees have heightened expectations regarding their supervisor than their co-workers (Herscovis & Barling, 2010). Additionally, we found consistent results using a three-month and a six-month time lag, providing insights into the appropriate time lag in longitudinal research, which should be "neither too long nor too short" (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010, p.103). The use of time-lagged designs also helps alleviate concerns about common method bias (Maxwell & Cole, 2007; Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010) and contributes to the lack of research studying the effects of leadership over time (Martinko et al., 2013; Skogstad, Aasland, et al., 2014).

### ***Practical Implications***

As more than one in four workers leave their jobs over the course of a year (Mahan et al., 2020), no organization is unaffected by issues related to turnover. Therefore, it is detrimental for practitioners to take steps to limit employee turnover, especially since 78% are preventable (Mahan et al., 2020). The present findings offer some insights to limit employee turnover. Our results imply

that supervisors must recognize that they play an important role in employee turnover. Results show that when leaders avoid or neglect their employees they have direct consequences for the value of employees' membership in and their emotional connection to the organization. We highlight that it is important for leaders to be present and in touch with employees' needs because their action impact how employees feel connected to the organization. Thus, it is essential for leaders to understand that they must foster the employee's sense of belonging in the organization as it has important implications on employees' desire to remain in the organization. The selection of leaders that are proud and effective representatives of the values and mission of the organization may be helpful to assert this bond. The coaching and training of leaders as assertive representatives of the organization as well as the communication of the organization's mission and goals can help create meaningfulness to the employee's role and identity in the organization. Moreover, organizations must find ways to foster and nurture employees' bond with the organization, independently from leaders. The implementation of practices and the adoption of collective activities that convey to the employees that they are valuable members of the organization and that foster a sense of community may help alleviate the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership. As such, organizations can take steps to help create meaning and value to employees' organizational identity, which would lower their desire to exit the organization.

### ***Study Limitations and Future Research***

Despite the strengths of our study, there are some limitations. First, all of our measures are self-reported. However, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003), we took steps to limit potential common method bias by temporally separating the measurements of predictor and outcome variables. We also advised participants that their responses would be confidential, and we told them to respond without hesitation as they were no right or wrong answers in order to collect responses as honest as possible. Moreover, psychological constructs, such as organizational identity, AOC, and turnover intentions may be best assessed through self-reports. Laissez-faire leadership is also generally measured through the subjective perceptions of participants (Norris et al., 2021). Self-reports of passive forms of leadership are similar to co-worker-reported measures of leadership (Che et al., 2017) and are more appropriate than leader-reported measures, which tend to underestimate the phenomenon (Corrigan et al., 2002). While the use of an objective measure,

voluntary turnover behavior, helps address the limitations that may be associated with self-reports, the use of multiple ratings of leader behavior in future research would help strengthen the findings.

Second, attrition analyses for both Study 1 and Study 2 (first sample) showed that the probability of participants remaining in the sample at Time 3 was influenced by gender and Time 1 laissez-faire leadership, respectively. Hence participant attrition was not completely random, which may be an issue in longitudinal studies (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). However, further analyses demonstrated that, while there might be limited attrition bias, difference in average scores on laissez-faire leadership was minor in practice (Goodman & Blum, 1996) and, as shown in Table 3, gender in Study 1 was also unrelated to any of the substantive variables. Moreover, by using the FIML procedure, we retained more power and limited the effects of attrition because all participants (with or without missing variables) and data available were included in the analyses (Enders & Bandalos, 2001; Newman, 2009). The replication of our findings in two studies may also provide additional support for the robustness of our results. Nonetheless, we encourage future research to replicate our results in different contexts and industries.

Third, all samples included participants from an individualistic country, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Indeed, collectivistic cultures may influence how employees value their organizational membership and their turnover behavior. According to the GLOBE study of cultures from around the World (House et al., 2004), countries may differ in terms of in-group collectivism and of institutional collectivism. As such, if a country has a higher level of in-group collectivism, they tend to have higher group loyalty, express greater organizational proudness, and experience greater cohesiveness in their organizations. Furthermore, high levels of institutional collectivism influences how employees are integrated in and how they identify with their organizations. Consequently, these two aspects may have an important incident on the sense of organizational identity threat. On the one hand, it is possible that individuals from collectivistic cultures are less prone to experience these threats because they are more naturally drawn to their organizations. On the other hand, it may be that they have higher expectations of collective-oriented behavior from their leaders and as such may be more negatively affected by the failure of leaders to foster their bond with the organization. Future research is needed to investigate how these collectivistic aspects influence employees' reactions to laissez-faire leadership and how their organizational identity is threatened by their leader.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This study introduces the concept of employees' organizational identity threat to explain how laissez-faire leadership can lead to employee turnover. We demonstrated that laissez-faire leadership can be perceived as a threat to an employee's organizational identity, leading to their reduced psychological attachment to the organization and enhanced psychological detachment from the organization. By doing so, we highlight the role of leaders in turnover likelihood and explain how their neglect of subordinates can have detrimental effects on employees and organizations. The mechanisms explaining the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership remain an important line of research. Indeed, despite our contributions, additional research is needed to fully understand the specificity of the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership on turnover and organizational outcomes.

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**Table 1.** Pilot Study: Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models Comparing Org. Identity Threat and Related Constructs

	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
1. Theorized six-factor solution	1116.17***	644	.91	.90	.060	–	–
2. Five-factor, combining org. identity threat and AOC	1767.14***	650	.79	.78	.092	650.97***	6
3. Five-factor, combining org. identity threat and job satisfaction	1342.53***	650	.87	.86	.073	226.36***	6
4. Five-factor, combining org. identity threat and perceived org. support	1681.60***	650	.81	.79	.089	565.43***	6
5. Five-factor, combining org. identity threat and LMX	1356.97***	650	.87	.86	.074	240.80***	6
6. Five-factor, combining org. identity threat and workplace isolation	1898.69***	650	.77	.75	.098	782.52***	6

*Note.* *N* = 199-201. Org = organizational; LMX = leader-member exchange.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 2.** Study 1: Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models

	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
1. Hypothesized four-factor solution	357.76***	203	.98	.97	.032	–	–
2. Three-factor, combining laissez-faire and org. identity threat	1717.74***	206	.77	.74	.099	1359.98***	3
3. Three-factor, combining AOC and turnover intentions	702.49***	206	.92	.91	.057	344.73***	3
4. Three-factor, combining org. identity threat and AOC	867.59***	206	.90	.89	.065	509.83***	3
5. Third-factor, combining org. identity threat and turnover intentions	819.41***	206	.91	.89	.063	461.65***	3
6. Two-factor, combining laissez-faire with org. identity threat and AOC with turnover intentions	2062.75***	208	.71	.68	.109	1704.99***	5
7. Two-factor, combining org. identity threat, AOC, and turnover intentions	1214.17***	208	.84	.83	.080	856.41***	5
8. Two-factor, combining laissez-faire, org. identity threat and turnover intentions	2208.50***	208	.69	.66	.113	1850.74***	5
9. One-factor, combining all variables	2651.64***	209	.62	.58	.125	2293.88***	6

*Note.*  $N = 747$ , based on FIML estimation. *df* = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; AOC = affective organizational commitment.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	45.00	11.99	–							
2. Gender	1.27	0.47	-.02	–						
3. Organizational tenure (years)	12.94	10.43	.57**	-.09*	–					
4. Tenure with the supervisor (years)	4.70	5.05	.23**	-.00	.38**	–				
5. Laissez-faire leadership (T1)	2.19	1.24	-.03	.06	.06	.06	(.90)			
6. Organizational identity threat (T2)	2.65	1.51	-.11	-.05	.05	-.08	.23**	(.93)		
7. AOC (T3)	3.94	0.82	.15*	.03	.00	.10	-.21**	-.66**	(.92)	
8. Turnover intentions (T3)	2.13	1.50	-.19**	-.07	-.06	-.08	.18**	.53**	-.63**	(.92)

*Note.* Correlations are based on the data available at a given time: T1 *N* = 716-751, T2 *N* = 337, T3 *N* = 250-251. For Gender, 1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = other. Cronbach's alphas are reported in parentheses. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; AOC = affective organizational commitment.

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01.

**Table 4.** Study 2: Fit Indices for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models

	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
1. Hypothesized four-factor solution	792.49***	203	.92	.91	.063	–	
2. Three-factor, combining laissez-faire and org. identity threat	2354.95***	206	.72	.69	.119	1562.46***	3
3. Three-factor, combining AOC and turnover intentions	1269.66**	206	.86	.84	.084	477.17***	3
4. Three-factor, combining org. identity threat and AOC	1515.55***	206	.83	.81	.093	723.06***	3
5. Third-factor, combining org. identity threat and turnover intentions	1306.95***	206	.86	.84	.086	514.46***	3
6. Two-factor, combining laissez-faire with org. identity threat and AOC with turnover intentions	2824.03***	208	.66	.62	.131	2031.54***	5
7. Two-factor, combining laissez-faire, org. identity threat and turnovers intentions	2970.27***	208	.64	.60	.135	2177.78***	5
8. One-factor, combining all variables	3858.24***	209	.52	.47	.155	3065.75***	6

*Note.* *N* = 731, based on Sample 1 with FIML estimation. *df* = degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; AOC = affective organizational commitment.

\*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 5.** Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	28.14	9.16	–								
2. Gender	1.73	0.45	-.03	–							
3. Organizational tenure (years)	3.65	5.07	.66**	.01	–						
4. Tenure with the supervisor (years)	1.97	2.85	.43**	.02	.59**	–					
5. Laissez-faire leadership (T1)	2.02	0.97	.07	-.04	.11**	.10**	(.93)				
6. Organizational identity threat (T2)	2.52	1.09	-.09*	-.03	-.08	-.06	.28**	(.94)			
7. AOC (T3)	3.22	0.91	.00	.02	-.01	-.01	-.17**	-.27**	(.90)		
8. Turnover intentions (T3)	2.62	0.94	-.16**	.02	-.19**	-.08	.09	.29**	-.42**	(.91)	
9. Actual voluntary turnover (T3)	0.19	0.40	-.17**	-.05	-.18**	-.09	-.16**	.15**	.10	-.12*	–

Note. Correlations are based on Sample 2 and on the data available at a given time: T1 *N* = 800-803, T2 *N* = 493, T3 *N* = 357-374. For gender, 1 = male, 2 = female. For actual voluntary turnover, 0 = stayed in the organization, 1 = voluntary left the organization. Cronbach's alphas are reported in parentheses. AOC = affective organizational commitment.

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01.

**Table 6.** Summary of Mediated Models Results

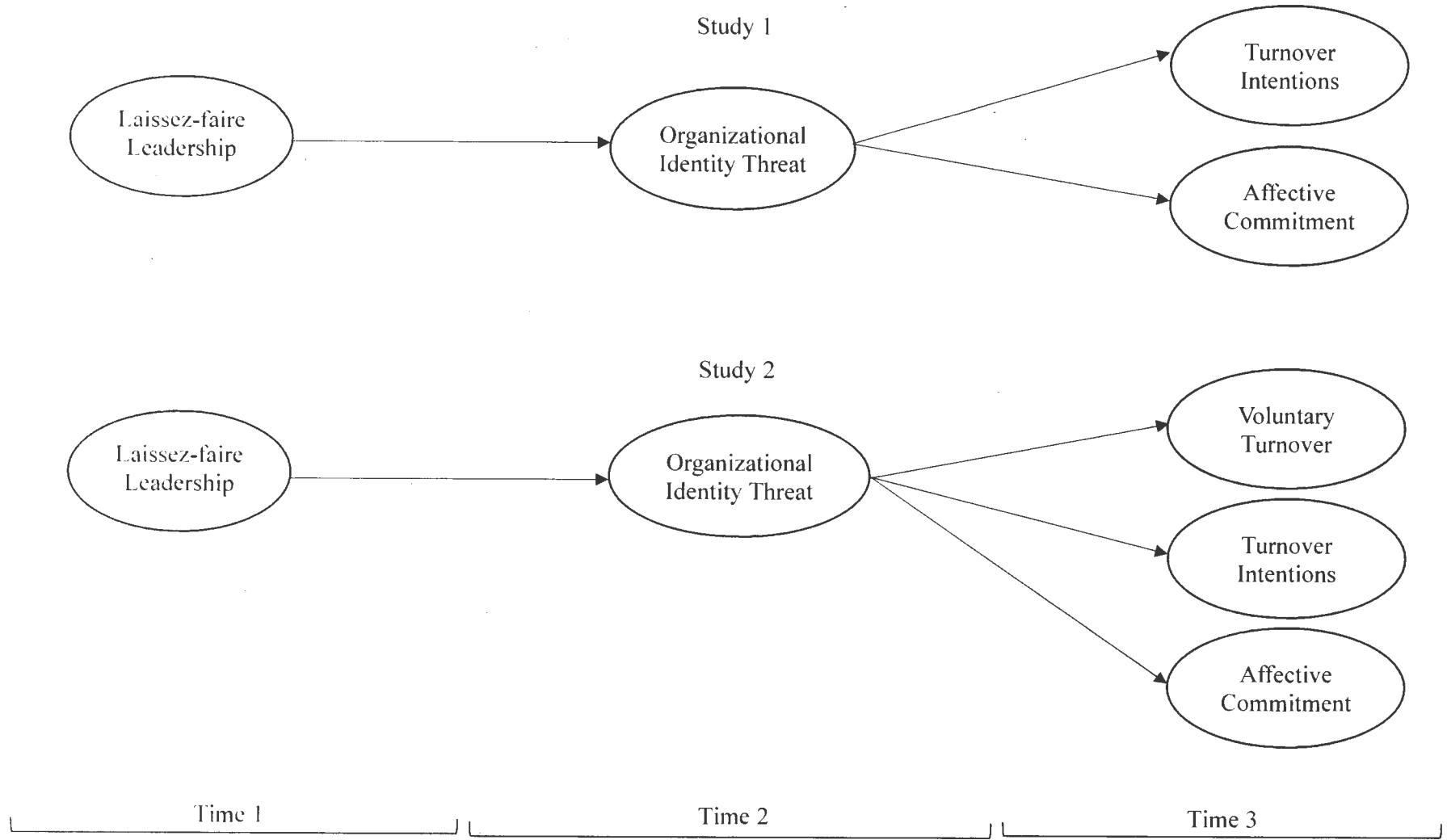
Dependent variables: Variables	T2 Organizational Identity Threat		T3 AOC			T3 Turnover Intentions			T3 Voluntary Turnover		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Study 1 ( <i>N</i> = 757)											
T1 Laissez-faire leadership →	.37***	.09	-.03	.05		.05	.10				
T2 Organizational identity threat →			-.33***	.04		.53***	.09				
Laissez-faire leadership → Org. identity threat →			-.12*	.03	[-.194, -.062]	.20*	.06	[.095, .326]			
Study 2 – Sample 1 ( <i>N</i> = 731)											
T1 Laissez-faire leadership →	.37***	.06	-.03	.06		-.06	.07				
T2 Organizational identity threat →			-.43***	.09		.47***	.09				
Laissez-faire leadership → Org. identity threat →			-.16*	.03	[-.230, -.099]	.18*	.04	[.102, .265]			
Study 2 – Sample 2 ( <i>N</i> = 803)											
T1 Laissez-faire leadership →	.37***	.06							-.29**	.08	
T2 Organizational identity threat →									.24***	.07	
Laissez-faire leadership → Org. identity threat →									.24*	.07	[.079, .333]

*Note.* Based on data imputation through full information maximum likelihood. *B* = unstandardized beta coefficient; *SE* = standard error;

AOC = affective organizational commitment; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3.

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.

Figure 1. Theoretical models for Study 1 and Study 2





## Conclusion

The current dissertation focused on the effects of laissez-faire leadership on employees' job attitudes and psychological well-being. To enhance our understanding of *why* and *when* laissez-faire leadership impacts negatively employees, we studied the mechanisms and the contextual boundaries of these effects. Main analyses were performed on three different samples using three-wave time-lagged designs and structural equation modeling. In the first essay, we examined the relationships between laissez-faire leadership, leader-member exchange (LMX), and affective organizational commitment (AOC). Using social exchange theory, we explained how the contribution dimension of LMX acts as a mediator in the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and AOC. Building on the identity orientation framework, we also showed how this effect is contingent on employees' relational self-concept. In the second essay, we showed the effects of laissez-faire leadership on two indicators of employees' psychological well-being, positive mental health and depressive symptoms. We further expected supervisor perceived organizational status to act as a moderator of these relationships. Additionally, with an experimental design, we demonstrated the distinct effects of laissez-faire leadership on these health outcomes in comparison to the those of active forms of leadership (i.e., constructive leadership and abusive supervision). Finally, in the third essay, we built on tenets of social identity theory to introduce the concept of an employee's organizational identity threat. We argued that this construct mediates the effects of laissez-faire leadership on three organizational-related outcomes, psychological attachment (i.e., AOC), psychological detachment (i.e., turnover intentions) from the organization, and actual voluntary turnover. We now discuss in more detail the empirical results and the contributions of these essays.

In the first essay, we focused on the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and affective organizational commitment. We tested our propositions with a sample of 449 employees from multiple organizations, a three-wave time-lagged design, and structural equations modeling analyses that controlled for the baseline levels of our mediator and outcome variable. Using social exchange theory, we posited that laissez-

faire leaders damage their relationship with their subordinates, which subsequently would affect subordinates' affective commitment towards the organization. As such, this research presents laissez-faire leadership as a negative antecedent of LMX and AOC, contributing to a neglecting area of research, which usually focuses on their outcomes or positive predictors (Erdogan & Liden, 2002; Yukl et al., 2009). Moreover, we specifically highlight the role of one dimension of LMX, the contribution dimension, to describe how laissez-faire leadership affects AOC, while demonstrating that the other LMX dimensions are not affected by laissez-faire leadership. Taking this disaggregated approach to LMX contributes to a very limited line of research (e.g., Greguras & Ford, 2006; Lee, 2005; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020) that has attempted to understand the specific effects of the individual dimensions of LMX.

Moreover, building on the identity orientation framework (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), the employees' relational self-concept was considered as a boundary condition in the relationship between laissez-faire leadership and these outcomes. The negative effects of laissez-faire leadership were shown to operate only when employees defined their identities through their dyadic relationships. This highlights the importance of considering employees' dispositional characteristics when studying the effects of laissez-faire leadership (e.g., Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2019) and alludes to the idea that the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership may not be as universal as previously considered (e.g., Bass & Bass, 2008).

Interestingly, findings showed that, when employees have very low relational self-concepts, their contribution to mutual dyadic goals may even be enhanced. This may be because laissez-faire leaders meet their expectations in terms of dyadic exchanges. Moreover, we found that the other two types of self-concept (i.e., individual and collective self-concepts) also act as moderators in the effects of laissez-faire leadership on the contribution dimension of LMX. These results illustrate that individuals may react strongly when laissez-faire leaders pose a threat to any of their self-concepts and the goals they strive for. This idea of threat to their identity is revisited in the third essay. Practically, this essay highlights that it is important for practitioners to understand the unique needs and expectations of their employees. Leaders will be better equipped to know how and when to

intervene with their employees in order to contribute positively to their employee's self-defining goals.

In the second essay, the effects of laissez-faire leadership on employees' psychological well-being are evaluated. Hypotheses were tested with two studies. The first study uses a sample of 608 participants from various organizations, a three-wave time-lagged design and structural equations modeling analyses. The second study is a vignette experiment that compared with a sample of 190 participants the effects of laissez-faire leadership on employee psychological well-being with the effects of constructive and destructive forms of active leadership (i.e., constructive leadership and abusive supervision). By studying the effects of laissez-faire leadership on both positive mental health (i.e., well-being) and depressive symptoms (i.e., ill-being), this study is one of the few to consider in its full extent the concept of psychological well-being (Inceoglu et al., 2018), which is both the absence of negative health symptoms and the presence of positive mental health. Our results confirm that leaders play a role on the diminution of positive mental health (i.e., 6 months later) and the development of depressive symptoms (i.e., 6 months later and 12 months later) over time.

Additionally, we considered a contextual element that may act as a boundary condition specifying when laissez-faire leadership affects employees' psychological well-being. As these aspects are usually neglected in leadership studies focusing on health outcomes (Walsh & Arnold, 2020), we contribute to the literature by demonstrating that perceived supervisor organizational status magnifies the harmful consequences of laissez-faire leadership. We posited that, when employees perceived their supervisor to hold an high organizational standing, they may interpret that the organization is sanctioning and is responsible for the leader's laissez-faire behavior. In practice, this finding reveals that there are detrimental consequences when organizations are perceived as supporting and valorizing inadequate leaders. As such, organizations should be careful which types of leaders they select, support, and promote to avoid sending the signal to employees that they support laissez-faire leaders.

Moreover, this study showed that laissez-faire leadership impact employees' psychological well-being differently than active forms of leadership, which further demonstrates its uniqueness and distinctiveness as a form of leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad, Hetland et al., 2014). Our results show that laissez-faire leadership impacts health outcomes more negatively than constructive leadership, but less than abusive supervision. Practically, these results imply that it may be better for the employee's health to be an absent leader than an abusive one. Leaders must be aware that they play an important role on employees' psychological health and must learn to recognize and limit their detrimental behavior.

In the third essay, the relationships between laissez-faire leadership and employee turnover is evaluated, while considering for the mediating effect of a newly introduced construct, an employee's organizational identity threat. This essay included a pre-study with a sample of 201 participants to validate the scale of organizational identity threat and two different studies with three-wave time-lagged designs and structural equation modeling analyses to test our hypotheses. The first study used a sample of 757 participants working in the manufacturing industry and the second a sample of 731 participants from various differing organizations. We found that laissez-faire leadership relates to reduced employee's psychological attachment (i.e., AOC) to the organization, increased psychological detachment (i.e., turnover intentions), and increased likelihood of actual voluntary turnover through organizational identity threat. This is one of the first studies to evaluate the effects of laissez-faire leadership on actual voluntary turnover, and as such it provides insights into fostering employee retention.

While we reasoned, based on social exchange theory, that laissez-faire leadership affects employees' AOC through LMX in the first essay, we showed that organizational identity threat also acts as a mediator in this relationship according to social identity theory. Building on the first essay's findings that laissez-faire leadership may be detrimental to employees' identities, we introduced the concept of organizational identity threat. We explained that laissez-faire leadership may threaten the value and the meaning of an employee's organizational identity. By introducing this new construct, we highlighted the importance of identity-related processes in turnover studies and presented

a mechanism by which the passivity of laissez-faire leaders can negatively impact employees. Moreover, the measure of organizational identity threat we developed can be a proficient tool for researchers in the investigation of identity threats in organizations (Petriglieri, 2011). Practically, these results stressed that it is important for leaders to foster the bond between their employees and the organization. However, as inadequate leaders may fail to do so and contributes to employee turnover, organizations should find other ways to make employees feel like important and valuable members of the organization through their practices and collective activities.

Taken together, these essays demonstrated with strong methodological designs and analyses that laissez-faire leadership has long-term negative effects on employees. Therefore, we contribute to answering an important question: “What are the effects of non-responsive leader behavior over time?” (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b, p. 510). Various outcomes have been investigated pertaining to their relationship with their supervisor (i.e., LMX), their bond with their organization (i.e., AOC, organizational identity threat, turnover intentions, and actual voluntary turnover), and their psychological well-being (i.e., positive mental health and depressive symptoms). Building on social identity theory and social exchange theory, we introduced LMX and organizational identity threat as mechanisms that can explain *why* laissez-faire leadership impacts employees. Moreover, we evaluated both contextual elements (i.e., perceived supervisor organizational status) and dispositional characteristics (i.e., relational self-concept) that can explain *when* the effects of laissez-faire leadership may be amplified. By focusing on the mechanisms and boundary conditions of laissez-faire leadership’s impact on employees’ job attitudes and psychological well-being, the purpose of this dissertation was to further researchers’ and practitioners’ knowledge of the ways to reduce and limit the detrimental effects of this leadership style.

While this dissertation is a first constructive step towards a better understanding of laissez-faire leadership, this leadership domain is still a relatively novel and an emerging topic in leadership research and, as such, remains an important area for future enquiry. There is still a lot of elements that need to be investigated to fully understand the effects of laissez-faire leadership and its unique contributions as a distinct leadership style.

Thus, building on this dissertation's findings, we highlight below some ideas worth pursuing in future research.

First, while we set out to understand the mechanisms and boundary conditions of laissez-faire leadership negative impacts on employees, the present findings do not unequivocally support that the effects of laissez-faire leadership are always negative. Indeed, in the first essay, we found that laissez-faire leadership's negative effects were contingent on employees' self-concepts and may even have positive effects when these behaviors matched the employee's relational expectations. The third essay also demonstrated that laissez-faire leadership may reduce employees' actual voluntary turnover when we do not account for its effect on an employee's organizational identity threat. As such, our results may have contributed to answering some researcher's questions: "When is laissez-faire leadership appropriate and effective?" (Bass & Bass, 2008, p.1193) and "When should the leader back off and allow the subordinates to carry on without him/ her?" (de Vries, et al., 2002, p.133). However, there is limited empirical evidence to support the positive outcomes of laissez-faire leadership. Ryan and Tipu (2013) found that it may help create an environment where innovation can occur. Yang and Li (2016) found that, when absent leaders avoid conflicts, it may have a positive effect on employee's attitudes and well-being in China where avoidance may be culturally acceptable (Yang & Li, 2016). Recent research has also sought to understand how laissez-faire leadership may be related to positive forms of leadership, such as delegation (Norris et al., 2021) and empowering leadership (Wong & Giessner, 2018). Nonetheless, more research is necessary to fully understand when laissez-faire leadership is not harmful to individual and organizational outcomes or when it may even be beneficial.

Second, while we demonstrated the unique effects of laissez-faire leadership on health outcomes in the second essay, we did not consider how the effects of laissez-faire leadership on other outcomes related to those of active forms of leadership. However, there are important conceptual distinctions between passive and active forms of leadership, which may indicate that laissez-faire leadership influences outcomes through unique mechanisms. For instance, while active leadership styles always involve an intensification of (positive or negative) social interactions, laissez-faire leadership

represents the reduction or absence of social interactions between leaders and followers. Thus, because laissez-faire leadership consists of the omission rather than the commission of behavior (Kelloway et al., 2005), it is different from other forms of leadership. Moreover, the experience of laissez-faire leadership is ambiguous because the absence of leader behavior is more covert and subtle in nature (Robinson & Schabram, 2019). While active and approaching leaders send clearer signals, the presence and meaning of laissez-faire leadership is harder to verify and assert, leaving more space for subordinates' interpretation. While some research has attempted to understand the distinction between passive and active behavior, this line of research is mostly limited to the workplace aggression literature (e.g., Ferris et al., 2016). As such, more insights are needed to understand how responses to passive behaviors from the leader may differ from the responses to active ones. Future research should simultaneously study the effects of laissez-faire leadership and active forms of constructive and destructive leadership to identify the specific mechanisms of laissez-faire leadership and to understand how it uniquely affects employees.

Finally, our findings showed that employees' expectations and interpretation of their leader's laissez-faire behavior influence its effects. Because there are numerous factors that can influence how employees expect their leader to act, there are additional moderators worth studying in association with laissez-faire leadership that can explain why some individuals may be more affected by laissez-faire leaders or why different contexts may amplify or reduce to the negative effects of laissez-faire leadership. Indeed, multiple sociocultural factors can influence how employees expect a leader to behave (Einarsen et al., 2007). Because the social context as well as organizational values and norms impact subordinates' expectations, they shape the meaning and the experience of passive behavior (Robinson et al., 2013). Thus, contextual elements such as organizational culture, power distance, or collectivism are worth investigating in relation to laissez-faire leadership. Moreover, subordinate perceptions of laissez-faire behavior may also be influenced by the characteristics of the subordinates (e.g., Diebig & Bormann, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2019), such as their self-esteem, sense of efficiency, or locus of control. Future research should attempt to further understand the contextual and dispositional characteristics that influence what employees expect and need from their

leader and how do employees interpret their leader's behavior. Ultimately, it becomes important to delineate the critical moments and contexts when leaders need to be present and available for their employees. Given recent events, work structures may become more and more virtual, creating physical distance between leaders and their employees. Thus, answers to these questions may become increasingly important. By representing the abdication of one's responsibilities as a leader (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008a; Skogstad, Hetland, et al., 2014), one fundamental question underlies the study of laissez-faire leadership: What does it mean to be a leader?



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