



# Beware the angry leader: Trait anger and trait anxiety as predictors of petty tyranny<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on the general aggression model and theories of victimization and temperamental goodness-of-fit, we investigated trait anger and trait anxiety as antecedents of petty tyranny: employing a multilevel design with data from 84 sea captains and 177 crew members. Leader trait anger predicted subordinate-reported petty tyranny. Subordinate trait anxiety was associated with subordinate-reported petty tyranny. The association between leader trait anger and subordinate-reported petty tyranny was strongest among low trait anger subordinates supporting the theory of temperamental goodness-of-fit—or rather misfit—in dyads. Hence, leader anger-generated petty tyranny seems to constitute itself both as an average leadership style and as behavior targeting specific subordinates, in this case low trait anger subordinates. In addition, anxious subordinates report more exposure to such abusive leadership behaviors irrespective of levels of trait anger in the captain. The practical implications are above all the needs for organizational and individual management of leader trait anger.

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## 1. Introduction

“Anyone can get angry, or give and spend money—these are easy; but doing them in relation to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, with the right aim in view, and in the right way—that is not something anyone can do, nor is it easy”. Aristotle: *Nicomachean ethics* (trans. 2000, p. 35)

Aristotle was not, in our opinion, barking up the wrong tree when he declared anger to be a tricky beast in relation to over-the-line behavior. Our question is how trait anger operates in relation to a modern conceptualization of a specific over-the-line behavior in working life: petty tyranny among leaders and managers. The concept of petty tyranny or tyrannical leadership (see also Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007) was originally introduced by Ashforth (1994) as a description of leaders who lord their powers over subordinates, by self-aggrandizement, belittling subordinates, behaving in arbitrary ways, showing non-contingent punishment, discouraging initiative, and showing a lack of consideration.

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The concept of petty tyranny may act as an umbrella concept for a range of similar but more recently introduced concepts, such as destructive leadership (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Schyns & Hansbrough, 2010), generalized workplace abuse (Rospenda, Richman, Wislar, & Flaherty, 2000), workplace bullying (Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2009), and abusive supervision (cf. Tepper, 2007 for how some of these concepts interrelate): focusing on the sustained hostile and demeaning behavior of superiors against their subordinates. Explicit empirical research on such destructive leadership behaviors is relatively recent, with clear inspiration from other fields of research such as workplace deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), counterproductive work behavior (Fox & Spector, 2005), hostile workplace behaviors (see Keashly & Jagatic, 2003, p. 33), workplace bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003), and victimization at work (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Empirical studies on the association between such forms of leadership practices and detrimental outcomes for followers have accordingly been accumulating (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Tepper, 2007). Yet, few studies exist on the potential predictors of abusive and hostile forms of leadership behavior. Theoretical contributions, however, suggest a range of promising individual as well as situational predictors (Ashforth, 1994; Tepper, 2007). Among the proposed individual factors, various personality characteristics are commonly suggested (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Tepper, 2007), with trait anger as a particularly likely candidate, indicated by both theory (Hershcovis & Barling, 2007) and empirical evidence (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). In line with this, trait anger figures as a key factor in fundamental theories on interpersonal aggression, such as the *general aggression model* (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), along with several overarching models of counterproductive work behavior (e.g. Spector & Fox, 2005). Yet, empirically, trait anger as a predictor of petty tyranny remains to be tested. The first aim of this study is therefore to investigate the relationship between self-rated leader *trait anger* (Spielberger, 1996) and subordinate-rated petty tyranny, which we suggest to have both an individual level influence, and a group-level influence in line with an average leadership style approach.

Secondly, we wish to inquire about exposure to petty tyranny and personality in relation to the other party, to the follower—the target. In this we first turn to the pioneering work of Olweus (1978, 2003)—further supported by the later body of research on victimization at work (e.g. Aquino & Thau, 2009)—suggesting the largest group of victims being characterized by anxiety, self-doubt, and submissiveness. These victims may both be targeted more and experience the abuse they face differently than do other victims. The second aim of this study is therefore to investigate the relationships between self-rated subordinate *trait anxiety* (Spielberger, 1983) and subordinate-rated petty tyranny, which we suggest to be an individual-level influence on behalf of the subordinate.

Hershcovis and Barling (2007) call for more investigations of the relationship between actor and target in research on workplace aggression: combinations of leader and follower personality may, specifically, contribute beyond the main effects of either leader or follower personality on the follower ratings of petty tyranny (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Petty tyranny may take place both in teams but also in dyadic relationships (cf. Rayner & Cooper, 2003), indicating that an important issue may be how personalities fit together—or not (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), often called “interpersonal chemistry” in lay language. A basic temperamental *goodness-of-fit* is claimed to determine the development of parent and child relations, rather than the temperament of the child *per se*; poor fit leading to poor relations (Lerner & Lerner, 1983). The third aim of this study is therefore to investigate the qualified, interactive relationship between high self-rated leader trait anger and low self-rated subordinate trait anger in determining subordinate-rated petty tyranny, which we suggest to be a dyadic, hence within-group influence.

Thus, the three aims of the study correspond with making consecutive acquaintance with “the leaders and the followers both separately and in combination—that is, as leaders, followers, and linkages” (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008, p. 136), investigating the role which trait anger and trait anxiety may play in petty tyranny in these three different *dimensions of leadership* (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Theoretically, the study promises to shed light on some likely antecedents of petty tyranny and the according conceptual implications of them. In this, we have the overarching assumption that petty tyranny may both be a style affecting all subordinates, as well as being dyadic in nature. That is, we assume that abusive leaders will be generally abusive while some subordinates yet may be more affected than are others. Methodologically, the study promises to join the relatively few studies that clarify issues of levels of analysis (Yammarino, Dionne, Uk Chun, & Dansereau, 2005), and that do so while employing separate data sources in fighting single-source biases (Barling, Dupre, & Kelloway, 2009). The observant reader will furthermore have noticed how the two traits chosen, often regarded as parts of a neuroticism dimension of personality, are hypothesized to have somewhat different effects for actor and targets, hence following a narrow bandwidth personality approach (Bergner, Neubauer, & Kreuzthaler, 2010), as the broader personality dimension of neuroticism has yielded somewhat contradictory and inconclusive results in this domain (e.g. Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Salgado, 2002). For practice, the study promises to supply leaders, subordinates, and their organizations with a vantage point for devising countermeasures against the already documented troubles in the wake of petty tyranny.

## 2. Antecedents of petty tyranny and abusive supervision

To date, empirical investigations of antecedents of petty tyranny, and the conceptually close abusive supervision, range from macro- to micro-level factors in which harshness of thermal climate and degree of collective wealth on a societal level are the most distant macro-level predictors investigated (cf. Van de Vliert, Matthiesen, Gangsøy, Landro, & Einarsen, 2010). Further down the funnel of antecedents investigated, we find perceptions of organizational factors as well as micro-level attitudinal and state-like characteristics of leaders and subordinates. Hoobler and Brass (2006) for instance found that when university supervisors showed a high hostile attribution bias, and experienced a high amount of psychological contract violations from their

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