



# The depleted leader: The influence of leaders' diminished psychological resources on leadership behaviors ☆☆☆



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## ABSTRACT

While much is understood about the outcomes of different leadership styles, less is known about the antecedents of leadership, particularly with regards to how leaders' own psychological well-being impacts leadership behaviors. Using conservation of resources theory as a framework, we investigated the relationship between leaders' depleted resources and their leadership behaviors. Conceptualizing depressive symptoms, anxiety, and workplace alcohol consumption as resource depletion, we predicted that depletion would be associated with lower levels of transformational leadership, and higher levels of abusive supervision, and when taken together, would further exacerbate these effects on leadership behaviors. In a study of 172 leader–subordinate pairs, leaders' depressive symptoms, anxiety, and workplace alcohol consumption separately predicted lower transformational leadership, and higher abusive supervision. Furthermore, partial support was found for an exacerbating effect on transformational leadership and abusive supervision.

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## 1. Introduction

The focus of much leadership research is on its consequences and more specifically, the outcomes of either positive (e.g., transformational leadership; Bass & Riggio, 2006) or negative (e.g., abusive supervision; Tepper, 2007) leadership behaviors. In contrast, research on the predictors of leadership has lagged behind. While scholars have begun to investigate the individual, relational and contextual antecedents to transformational leadership (e.g., Bommer, Rubin, & Baldwin, 2004; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005), and abusive supervision (e.g., Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006; Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011), one variable that has been virtually neglected (see Tepper et al., 2006 for an exception) is leaders' own psychological well-being. In other words, are leaders adequately equipped to engage in positive leadership behaviors, or does a lack of psychological resources lead instead to destructive forms of leadership?

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The omission of psychological well-being as a predictor of leaders' own behavior contrasts strongly with a long tradition of research focusing on psychological distress within the leadership context more generally. The majority of this research, however, has been concerned with the effects of good and bad leadership on *subordinates'* well-being (e.g., Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006; Kelloway, Turner, Barling, & Loughlin, 2012) or the impact of leaders' stress on employees' stress (Skagert, Dellve, Eklöf, Pousette, & Ahlborg, 2008; Theorell, Emdad, Arnetz, & Weingarten, 2001). There has been limited parallel research interest in *leaders'* well-being more generally, or leaders' well-being as an antecedent of leaders' behaviors. This imbalance is so stark, one could argue that the lack of interest in leaders' well-being derives from several assumptions: That (1) all leaders enjoy a positive state of psychological health, as a result of which research is not needed, (2) research findings on employee well-being and distress generalize fully to the nature and effects of leaders' psychological functioning, and/or (3) even if all leaders are not psychologically healthy, psychological distress has no negative consequences for leaders, their employees, or their organizations. We question the legitimacy of all these assumptions. Using the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), we explore the role of leaders' psychological distress – or in other words, leaders' resource depletion – in predicting their leadership behaviors.

## 2. Conservation of resources

Conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 1998, 2001) predicts that individuals who lack personal resources will experience stress, and will also be prone to further resource loss. Accordingly, people strive to obtain and protect a finite number of valued psychological characteristics (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy), objects (e.g., housing, clothing), energies (e.g., time, knowledge), and conditions (e.g., job security, social support) (i.e. their resources; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Hobfoll, 1998, 2001) in an effort to prevent potential suffering. However, once resource depletion occurs, individuals may struggle to re-stock their resource reservoirs (Hobfoll, 2001). While COR theory maintains that people must invest resources to recover from losses, depleted individuals will often adopt a defensive posture to conserve what little they have left, and may even use counterproductive and/or self-defeating loss-control strategies to do so (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001).

Research has now explored the negative impact of diminished resources on organizational outcomes. For example, depleted employees are more likely to experience burnout (Halbesleben, 2006; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Neveu, 2007), job dissatisfaction, job tension, turnover intentions (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999), reduced job performance (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998), and are less likely to engage in employee voice (Ng & Feldman, 2012). COR theory is also being used to explain the outcomes of negative leadership. For example, leaders' abusive behaviors deplete subordinate resources, which in turn, negatively impact subordinates' work withdrawal (Chi & Liang, 2013), work–family conflict (e.g., Carlson, Ferguson, Hunter, & Whitten, 2012) and job performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007). A high quality, trusting leader–subordinate relationship (i.e., leader–member exchange) is also an important resource for reducing stress and work–family conflict among female employees (Bernas & Major, 2000), while ethical leadership is conceptualized as a resource that increases subordinate well-being and helping behavior (Kalshoven & Boon, 2012).

Despite this growing interest, little research exists involving COR and the effects of resources on leaders themselves. This shortage is surprising given the number and range of personal resources required for enacting high quality leadership. As elaborated below, to be effective leaders need a variety of cognitive (i.e. self-control, emotional intelligence), attitudinal (i.e., self-confidence, sense of mastery), and affective (i.e., optimism, hope) personal characteristics (Barling, Slater, & Kelloway, 2000; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Peterson, Walumbwa, Byron, & Myrowitz, 2009; Ross & Offermann, 1997; Walter & Bruch, 2007; Wang, Sinclair, & Deese, 2010). Thus, we suggest that there is much to be gained from using COR theory to understand the role of leaders' psychological resource depletion in predicting leadership behavior.

## 3. The demands of leadership

The tasks and behaviors required for effective leadership are inherently complex and demanding. Leaders must influence specific tasks, goals and broad strategies, employee commitment and compliance, and organizational culture (Yukl, 2000), social relationships (Parry, 2011) team effectiveness (Hackman, 2002), and decision-making (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996). Thus, much is required of leaders to be effective in their leadership role (Wang et al., 2010). Leaders therefore require an array of tools (e.g., personal characteristics, energies and various supports) – or in other words, a sufficient number of resources – if they are to be successful. This becomes evident when considering both positive and negative forms of leadership, namely transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007). We investigate the effects of resource depletion on both.

### 3.1. Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership now receives more empirical scrutiny than any other leadership theory (Barling, Christie, & Hopton, 2010; Bono & Judge, 2004). Transformational leadership is commonly understood as a reflection of four factors (Bass & Riggio, 2006). *Idealized influence* requires leaders to be role models with whom followers want to identify and emulate, and is characterized by high levels of charisma. *Inspirational motivation* involves articulating and communicating a clear and compelling vision of the future, and supporting followers as they pursue that vision. *Intellectually stimulating* leaders encourage innovation by challenging followers to think about problems and challenges in novel ways, and to question old assumptions. Finally, leaders

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