

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

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Abstract

The current investigation explores exploitative leadership's influence on employee absenteeism by utilizing the Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (SAC) theory. The theory posits that this relationship is mediated by emotional exhaustion among individuals employed within the federal public sector organizations under the Federal Education & Professional Training Division (FEPTD), Government. The study also explores emotional intelligence as a moderating variable in the connection between exploitative leadership and absenteeism. The research was conducted in a natural environment using a survey method with questionnaires administered to employees at three different time intervals (T1, T2, and T3). A five-point Likert scale was used for responses. The study employed a deductive approach, a time-lag research design, and a convenient sampling technique. The hypothesized framework was analyzed using AMOS and SPSS. The results indicate that employees who work under the influence of exploitative leaders are more prone to engage in absenteeism. The findings of the present research advocate that employees working under the supervisory role of exploitative leadership often experience a state of being overwhelmed, which leads to emotional exhaustion and consequently further intensifies the behavior of absenteeism as a coping mechanism. Notably, employees' emotional intelligence serves as a mitigating factor, diminishing the magnitude and

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

frequency of absenteeism within the workplace.

Keywords: Exploitative Leadership; Employee Absenteeism; Cognitive Appraisal.

1. Introduction

Leaders in the field of education undertake a diverse array of tasks, functioning as educational visionaries and overseeing legal matters (Choi, 2019). The complicated landscape of leadership, with its multi-dimensional and dynamic scope, pays deep attention to exploring various outcomes in the education sector. Previous literature underscores the pivotal role of leadership in workplace dynamics (Abbas et al., 2023; Pellitteri, 2021). Several researchers have expounded upon the detrimental impacts of poor leadership on employees' performance (Hafeez et al., 2023; Borst et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2024) and workplace behavior (Amin and Ali, 2022). Globally, organizations have shifted their focus toward exploring the darker facets of leadership. Such negative leadership styles encompass emerging constructs like abusive, despotic, destructive, and exploitative leadership (Tepper, 2000; De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008; Ahtisham et al., 2023; Son and Pak, 2023; Schmid et al., 2019; Schyns and Schilling, 2013; and Tourish and Willmott, 2023). Exploitative Leadership (EL) largely embodies the characteristics associated with destructive leadership (Wiguna et al., 2023). Employee Absenteeism is "leadership with the primary intention to further the leader's self-interest by exploiting others. This explanation of destructive leadership extends across five domains, namely genuine egoistic behaviours, taking credit, exerting pressure, undermining development, and manipulation. Thus, according to (Guo et al., 2021) EL, owing to its distinctive features, stands apart from other forms of detrimental or negative styles of leadership (Schmid et al., 2019).

The most salient characteristic of EL is the manifestation of egotism and a high degree of self-interest. According to (Wang et al., 2024) claim that EL always takes credit for the work of other accomplishments and gives preference to personal goals over the subordinate's performance and organizational objectives. According to (Sun et al., 2023) explains that EL exploits, controls, and demeans employees using tactical skills and manipulative techniques to build contention among the team members for personal goal achievement. Furthermore, such leadership attempts to overtax subordinates by assigning numerous chores to distress them despite understanding the fact that they have already been overburdened (Wang et al., 2024). If subordinates show defiance or imprudence, even unintentionally, EL loses control and starkly humiliates subordinates in the presence of co-workers to uphold dominance. Such humiliation demotivates subordinates which negatively affects their emotional stability and performance (Schmid et al., 2019).

The extant literature has highlighted the drawbacks of certain leadership styles, sparking lively debates about the idea of EL. Consequently, have explored a broad spectrum of dysfunctional consequences that have been observed at the individual and group level, intricately linked with EL. According to (Jensen et al., 2019) EL functions as a stressor that diminishes employees' productivity and creativity. The research conduct (Tepper et al., 2017) argue that while some research explicitly addresses theoretical mechanisms, such as how employees seek retribution due to bad leadership, fewer studies have examined the impacts of EL on various employee outcomes. The field still requires investigation to unveil the consequences of EL on different employee outcomes, such as its impact on employee

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

absenteeism (Pellitteri, 2021; Fatima and Majeed, 2023). Absenteeism is employees' unavailability and failure to report to workplaces as scheduled. According to (Harrison and Martocchio, 1998) employee absenteeism is a type of work withdrawal behaviour where employees detach themselves from assigned tasks when a stressful situation occurs at the workplace (Khan et al., 2023).

Previous research has argued that EL serves as a significant source of stress for employees working in the organization (Sun et al., 2023; Lyu, Wu, Ye, 2023), leading them to attempt to avoid the stressor. To cope with the exploitative behavior of leaders, employees try to adopt strategies to avoid the stress (Amin and Ali, 2022). Studies also claim that when employees experience stress-inducing behavior, they tend to cope by adopting absenteeism as a strategy to manage their available resources (Løkke et al., 2020). Such behavior helps to protect and safeguard the already existing cognitive and emotional resources (Amin and Ali, 2022). Studies have meticulously demonstrated the mutual relationship between leaders' exploitative behavior and workplace stress, emphasizing the need for further work to explicitly understand the essential mechanisms and insights that negatively impact employee outcomes. Hence, the current investigation endeavors to explore the role of the mediator, i.e., emotional exhaustion (EE), between EL and employees' absenteeism (Miraglia and Johns, 2021; Majeed and Fatima, 2020; Sun et al., 2023).

EE is the state of emotions where the available resources are entirely depleted (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Under the supervision of EL, employees consistently encounter inappropriate attitudes and behaviors that deplete and drain their emotional resources due to chronic stress and unwarranted demands (Cabarcos et al., 2021). Previous studies argued that EL is a significant source of stress, anxiety, and wear out of emotions at the workplace, which further exacerbates the situation and contributes to the emotional exhaustion of employees (Caillier, 2017; Lyu et al., 2023). The ongoing study also explored the role of emotional intelligence (EI) as a moderator between EL and absenteeism (Ali et al., 2024d).

Goleman claims that EI is a concept that encompasses a spectrum of social and emotional abilities influencing how individuals navigate challenges, cultivate and sustain social relationships, perceive and articulate themselves, and utilize emotional information effectively and meaningfully (Goleman, 2011). Consequently, individuals who excel in managing, controlling, and regulating their emotions are more likely to effectively cope with stressful situations (Ali et al., 2024). The author (Abbas et al., 2023) conducted an examination of the effects of dark leadership on employee outcomes, utilizing mediation and moderation models. They underscored the under-researched nature of education, citing challenges related to infrastructure and resources, teaching, recruitment, retention, and psychological well-being. The other pressures stem from rapid technological advancements, rising demand, an increasing need for quality, knowledge diffusion, competitiveness, and globalization (Pellitteri, 2021). The education sector in Pakistan grapples with numerous human resources-related challenges that impede its effectiveness and quality (Hameduddin and Lee, 2021; Sair et al., 2023). The country frequently contends with a shortage of qualified professionals, insufficient training, low salaries, bureaucratic obstacles, and a dearth of professional development opportunities (Amin and Ali, 2022). Some researchers posit that employee inefficiency in the education sector stems from the negative impact of dark-side leadership (Miao et al., 2018; Pellitteri, 2021). Hence, the objective of the present study was

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

to examine the influence of EL on employees' absenteeism by applying the theory of stress, appraisal, and coping (SAC). The study focuses on how individuals perceive and respond to a stressful environment in the workplace due to EL. Building on the aforementioned discussion, the current research seeks to explore the impact of EL on employee absenteeism at the workplace, considering emotional exhaustion (EE) as a mediating variable and emotional intelligence (EI) as a moderating variable among the employees in the federal government education organizations in Pakistan.

2. Theory and Hypotheses Development

The current study applied the Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (SAC) theory developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to examine the potential impacts of exploitative leadership (EL) on employees' absenteeism (EA) in the education sector of Pakistan. The stress theory posits those employees under EL experience stress, subsequently affecting their emotional resources. Persistent exposure to EL leads employees to become emotionally drained, thereby influencing their work-related attitudes and behaviors. Consequently, employees distance themselves from work as a coping mechanism for workplace stress. Stress is a response of the body's internal systems to any external stimuli that are potentially detrimental. The degree of confidence a person has in their ability to handle danger is directly proportional to the amount of stress they experience (Amin and Ali, 2022). Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of SAC theory clarified that a stressful event or situation necessitates a personal transaction (interaction) between the individual and the situation, not a universal experience. This interpretation serves as a more significant predictor of stress than the actual event itself. It means stress emerges from the subjective evaluations of individuals through different experiences. Such negative situations adversely influence the important goals of individuals (Lazarus, 1991). The theory provides a psychological framework to demonstrate individuals' perceptions and responses to a stressor (Folkman, 1984). According to (Biggs et al., 2017) this theory suggests that stress is not solely defined by external or uncontrollable events or circumstances, but rather by an individual's cognitive assessment of these experiences and the available coping mechanisms.

Within the theoretical framework of SAC, coping is characterized as a mechanism that involves both cognitive and behavioral responses to manage stressful situations. The process of cognitive and emotional stress management unfolds in two stages. In the primary appraisal stage, individuals assess the situation stress induced by EL as a challenge, threat, or harm (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984). Subsequently, in the secondary appraisal stage, employees, having appraised the stress, seek to adopt coping strategies such as absenteeism to address the perceived threat and save the available emotional resources from loss. The SAC theory recognizes two primary strategies for managing stressors: the problem-focused coping strategy and the emotion-focused coping strategy. The first strategy includes taking steps or actions to alter the stressful situation or its underlying causes. Individuals using the second, i.e., the problem-focused strategy, try to completely change the situation of stress or develop a plan of action to address the stressor effectively (Amin and Ali, 2022). However, when problem-focused coping is not possible or effective, individuals may engage in emotion-focused coping. This strategy focuses on regulating emotional responses to the stressor. It may involve seeking emotional support from others, using relaxation techniques, reframing

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

the situation, or finding ways to distract oneself from the stressor (Folkman et al., 1991). The current study uses the SAC theory to try to guess what effects emotional exhaustion (EE) and emotional intelligence (EI) have on employees' absences (EA), with EE being a mediating variable and EI being a moderating variable in the education sector workplace. This scholarly endeavor contributes to a broader understanding of workplace stress, appraisal, coping, and absenteeism dynamics in the field of organizational behavior (Ali et al., 2024a).

2.1 Exploitative Leadership and Employees' Absenteeism

Exploitative leaders, driven by self-interest, establish all their relationships with subordinates based solely on their own interests and benefits (Borst et al. 2020). Furthermore, these leaders frequently exploit their subordinates to accomplish personal goals (Schmid et al., 2019). According to (Ugaddan and Park, 2017) argue that EL typically abuses the subordinates through extrinsic rewards to attain both organizational and personal objectives. Employees who encounter EL may face unfavorable outcomes, including low commitment towards the organization, dissatisfaction, and a desire to leave (Schmid et al., 2019; Emmerling, Peus, and Lobbestael, 2023), which can further negatively impact their creativity and performance in the workplace. This information is supported by studies conducted by Ali et al., 2024b, and Amin and Ali in 2022. According to the author (Tepper et al., 2017), employee outcomes from dark leadership include high absenteeism, low productivity, and increased hospital expenses. Previous research has indicated that ELs are self-interested, act egoistically, take credit for the work of others, exert unnecessary pressure on their followers, and manipulate them (Guo, Luo, and Cheng, 2024). Such behaviors create a highly stressful workplace for employees, prompting them to adopt coping strategies to protect their emotional resources (Amin and Ali, 2022). Willful absence from work is one of the coping strategies that employees adopt to minimize the stress produced by EL (Pellitteri, 2021). Prior studies have confirmed that employees typically take brief breaks, such as momentary or instant absences from the assigned task, to manage the stressful work environment (Davies and Mabbett, 2023; Lyu et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2024c). Drawing on the Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (SAC) theory, this study postulates that EL functions as a workplace stressor, leading employees to perceive stress as a threat to their emotional resources. Employees respond to the threat of EE by adopting behavioral reactions to protect their valuable resources from the unfair behavior of EL. One of the coping strategies employees employ to preserve their emotional and cognitive resources within the workplace is engaging in absenteeism or intentionally keeping themselves away from work. Therefore, based on the previous literature, it is hypothesized that:

H1: *Exploitative leadership (EL) is positively related to employee absenteeism.*

2.2 Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion (EE)

According to Maslach and Jackson (1981; Cordes et al., 1993), EE is the thought or insight of an individual that the existing valuable emotional resources are likely to have been consumed. Feelings of overwhelm or burnout characterize the psychological phenomenon of EE, leading to the depletion of emotional resources. EE regularly challenges the employees' emotional capacity to handle the situation (Emmerling et al., 2023). However, prolonged exposure to EL led to employees losing control over their emotional regulation (Hassan,

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

Wright, and Yukl, 2014; Davies and Mabbett, 2023). Maslach's extensive exploration of the conceptual model of burnout also integrates EE as its primary component. Overwhelming and emotionally drained, EE is a result of lingering stress and excessive illegitimate demands. The author (Schmid et al., 2019) argues that the consistent oppressive, arduous, and dominating behavior of ELs can sometimes create a challenging environment for the subordinates at the workplace. Previous studies have explored the demanding, unpredictable, and always right behavior of ELs, which can be problematic for subordinates (Choi, 2019; Emmerling et al., 2023). They are unable to accurately predict EL behavior and respond accordingly (Wang et al., 2024). In this scenario, employees are hesitant to express their concerns about feelings, thoughts, and fear of revenge (Sun et al., 2023). Moreover, EL apprehension about micromanagement restricts autonomy, leaving subordinates stranded and disempowered (Guo et al., 2024). This prolonged state of unstable feelings creates a sense of devaluation and anxiety. Consequently, this emotional toll on employees affects not only their professional growth and development at the workplace but also negatively impacts their psychological, mental, and emotional health; thus, over time, consistent stress exacerbates the feeling of exhaustion (Van et al., 2010). Past studies have revealed that EE can significantly influence work-related outcomes, including job performance, job meaningfulness, work withdrawal behavior, the employee presence ratio, and higher absenteeism rates (Fan et al., 2020; Cabarcos et al., 2021). Emotionally exhausted employees lack the motivation and energy to come to work regularly because they perceive work as a constant source of stress in the presence of EL (Fan et al., 2020). Such employees display a pathetic sense of compassion and trust in their employer and tend to remain absent from work (Bartoll et al., 2019). When they are physically present in the office, they engage in non-work activities as a coping mechanism for the stressful situation, adopting work withdrawal strategies to protect their available cognitive and emotional resources from loss and avoid the stress EL creates (Emmerling et al., 2023). According to the SAC theory, employees under the supervision of EL will perceive the situation as a threat in the primary appraisal stage. EL persistent stress causes employees to experience emotional exhaustion, which depletes their available cognitive and emotional resources. In the secondary appraisal stage, employees choose absenteeism as a coping strategy to mitigate or avoid the work-related stress and pressure imposed by EL. Thus, in light of the above discussions, it is hypothesized that:

H2: *The relationship between EL and EA is mediated by EE.*

2.3 Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Emotional Quotient (EQ) are the terms interchangeably used and refer to an individual's ability to ascertain, comprehend, regulate, and harness emotions in both oneself and others (Ali et al., 2024). This concept comprises a series of traits and skills that empower individuals to successfully navigate overwhelming situations create enduring interpersonal relationships, and establish an environment for making thoughtful and judicious decisions based on emotional cognizance (Wang et al., 2024; Goleman, 2011; Ali et al., 2024b). EI is the ability of an individual to identify emotions, approach and form emotions to help out the process of cognition, understand emotions, and interpret their inferences (Eshuis et al., 2022). They are implying EI capabilities in such a manner to tactfully control and manage emotions to enhance feelings and thinking (Mayer and Salovey, 2007). Based on

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

the understanding of (Goleman, 2006), EI is the potential of an individual to adopt positive emotions like friendship, empathy, and confidence and according to (Eshuis et al., 2022) throw away negative emotions such as anger, worry, and poor self-esteem.

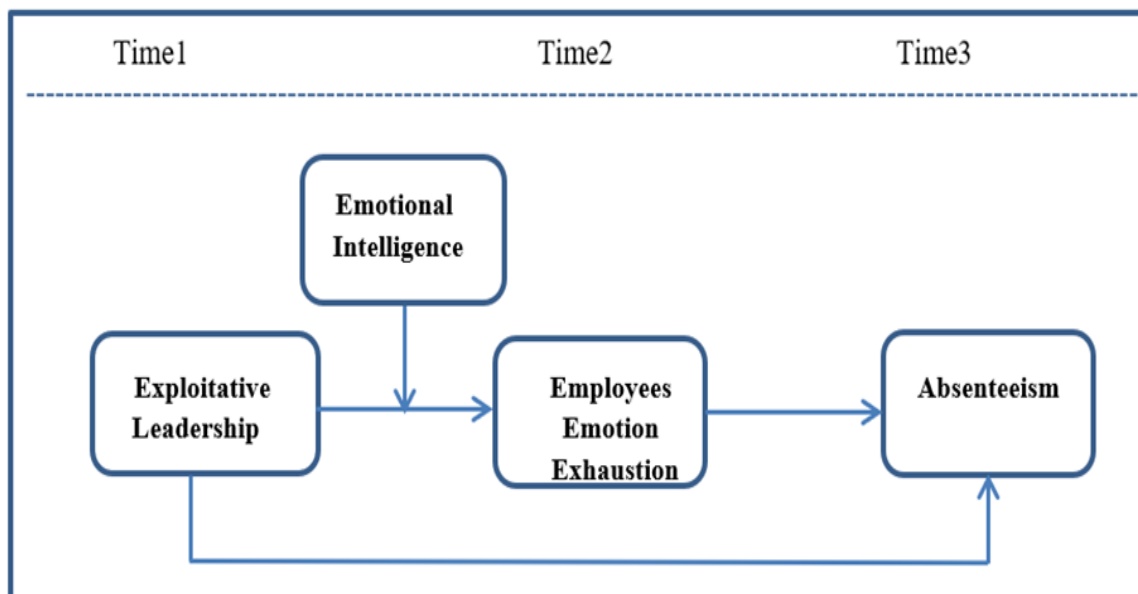
According to author (Mayer and Salovey, 2007) has developed an EI conceptual model focused on the perception of emotions, facilitation of emotions, comprehension of emotions, and regulation of emotions which has gained wide-ranged popularity in the field of emotions among behavioural scientists (Caruso and Salovey, 2004). This conceptual model of EI is the “gold standard” and plays a significant role in handling EL and reducing the level of stress of employees at the workplace (Antonakis et al., 2009). Employees having a reasonable level of EI can identify, comprehend, and deal with emotions which makes them capable of handling challenging circumstances proficiently (Xiang et al., 2021). Contrarily, employees with low levels of EI often struggle to understand and regulate emotions in particular situations resulting in poor control which further aggravates the outcome variables (Ajilchi et al., 2019) coupled with absenteeism. This is a coping strategy adopted by employees because at low levels of EI employees seldom understand how to navigate complex situations and surpass challenges in a dynamic environment (Eshuis et al., 2022). The theory of Stress, Appraisal, and Coping claims two stages of appraisal i.e. primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. In the primary appraisal, employees working under the leadership of EL first attempt to assess the stress situation either as a threat, challenge, or harm which hinges on the employees’ EI ability. Emotionally intelligent employees are well aware of dealing with the stress imposed by EL and delicately managing it. In the secondary appraisal stage, these employees are likely to experience fewer adverse outcomes due to their effective coping mechanisms at work. Conversely, employees with high EI actively resist negative thoughts and emotions, striving to maintain control over their emotional reactions. On the contrary, employees with low EI tend to appraise the stressful situation at work as a threat. Consistent exposure to this environment erodes their emotional resources which leads to exhaustion. To minimize the impact of the stressor (EL), they may adopt absenteeism as a coping strategy (Mayer et al., 2016; Ali et al., 2024a). Therefore, the current study operates EI as a moderating variable and thus hypothesizes that:

H3: *EI moderates the positive and indirect effects of EL on employees’ absenteeism via EE such that the indirect effect is weaker when EI is high.*

H4: *EI moderates the positive and indirect effects of EL on employees’ absenteeism via EE such that the indirect effect is stronger when EI is low.*

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

2.4 Research Methods



3.1 Research Approach

This study used a quantitative research strategy, following a deductive approach, and gathered data through survey questionnaires. It also utilized a time-lag design. The survey was conducted in a non-contrived setting, and the questionnaires were distributed among employees of public sector organizations operating under the Federal Education & Professional Training Division (FEPTD), serving as a sample from the population of federal government organizations (Flanagan, 1978). For the assessment of participants, self-report measures were considered appropriate for their supervisor displaying exploitative behaviour. However, EL, EE, EA, and EI are usually subjective. Hence, the method of attaining self-report responses appears suitable. Secondly, a non-probability convenient sampling technique was used for the collection of data from the participants to evade common method bias as authenticated by (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The survey for the collection of data was distributed into three-time lags (T1, T2, and T3) with a 4 to 5-week interval. Thus, data for the independent variable EL and moderating variable EI were collected at time T1. The data for the study's outcome variable, absenteeism, was recorded at time T2, and the data for the mediating variable EE was collected at time T3 (Forsberg & Rantala, 2020; Liao et al., 2015). Therefore, keeping in view the methodology of prior investigations the already applied procedure for data collection sample-to-item ratio method was utilized in deciding the sample size for the ongoing study. According to this method, the sample-to-item ratio must be 5 to 1. Thus, the authors targeted 450 respondents working in the FEPTD and finally received a total number of 313 responses at time T3 from the participants against the minimum mandatory responses of 190 for the 38 items in the survey questionnaire (Suhr, 2006; Memon et al., 2020).

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

3.2 Questionnaire Development

The authors distributed 450 questionnaires at time T1 and received 411 completed responses, which included respondents' demographic information (initials, gender, CNIC, qualification, marital status, and work experience). At time T2, a total of 411 questionnaires were distributed among the respondents, identified by unique ID or name, from FEPTD, and 373 responses were received. At time T3, the same respondents were targeted and distributed 373 questionnaires, resulting in a final 313 complete responses. The participants' response rate was 70%. (Rattray & Jones, 2007).

3.3 Variables Measurement and operationalization

This study utilized the already established and validated measures for the under-study construct for the collection of data from the participants. All the constructs were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items of the constructs were slightly modified for the study to enhance their suitability and appropriateness for the prevailing cultural values and norms, ensuring more meaningful insights (Edmonds & Gudmestad, 2018).

3.3.1 Exploitative Leadership (EL)

For the assessment of the construct i.e. exploitative leadership at time T1, 15-items scale was utilized which was developed by (Schmid et al., 2019). The items of the construct consist of: *"Takes it for granted that my work can be used for his or her personal benefit"*, *"Puts me under pressure to reach his or her goals"* etc. The instrument demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient value of 0.87.

3.3.2 Absenteeism

The outcome variable i.e. employee absenteeism was measured at time T2 using a 5-items scale for the assessment ranging from 1 (never) to 5 very frequent; every day). Three scale items were utilized from (Geurts et al., 1994) and two from (Autry and Daugherty, 2003). The items of the construct include: *"I have been absent for reasons associated with work stress this year"*, and *"How often have you been absent from the job because you just didn't feel like going to work?"*. The instrument demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient value of 0.90.

3.3.3 Emotional Exhaustion (EE)

The mediating variable i.e. emotional exhaustion was assessed at time T3 using an 8-item scale from (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). The items of the construct include *'I feel emotionally drained from my work'* etc. The value of internal consistency of the scale is 0.95.

3.3.4 Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional intelligence was assessed at time T1 using a 10-item scale developed by (Davies, et al., 2010), which is derived from (Salovey and Mayer's, 1990) conceptualization. The scale was consequently labeled the Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale (BEIS-10). Sample items include questions such as *"I know why my emotions change"* and *"I have control over my emotions"* etc. The internal consistency of the scale is 0.85.

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

4. Analysis and Results

Utilizing the conceptual model of the theory of stress, appraisal, and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), the present investigation has derived possible hypotheses. The study employed a survey research method, collecting data from the participants through a questionnaire. The study verified, coded, screened, and properly analyzed the collected data using SPSS and AMOS v. 24. The performed a test of normality to validate the data. Similarly, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the assessment of convergent and discriminant validities. The used the structure equation modeling (SEM) technique to test the suggested hypotheses and determine the relationship among the variables and their general tendencies. SPSS supported the evaluation and analysis of data by suggesting the PROCESS techniques (Hayes, 2015).

4.1 Reliability and Validity

The construct items were conspicuously tested to examine their reliability and validity. The value of the reliability of the measurement items was above 0.70 as compared to the Cronbach's alpha value. In the same manner, for the composite reliabilities of the construct items, the values emerged as between 0.78 to 0.92, which falls in the recommended acceptance range of the threshold value of 0.70 authenticated by (Nunnally, 1982). The factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) also exceeded the prescribed limits of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively.

Table 1: Analysis of Validity and Reliability of Construct Items

Construct	Items	Item Loading	CR	AVE	Alpha
EL	EL1	0.738***	0.775	0.584	0.87
	EL2	0.736***			
	EL3	0.753***			
	EL4	0.784***			
EE	EE1	0.783***	0.829	0.536	0.95
	EE2	0.753***			
	EE3	0.761***			
	EE4	0.789***			
	EE5	0.727***			
	EE6	0.789***			
EI	EI1	0.710***	0.894	0.524	0.85
	EI2	0.732***			
	EI3	0.773***			
	EI4	0.745***			
	EI5	0.782***			
	EI6	0.731***			
EA	EI7	0.723***	0.921	0.583	0.90
	EA1	0.757***			
	EA2	0.778***			
	EA3	0.778***			
	EA4	0.773***			
	EA5	0.763***			

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

To determine the correlation coefficient values, the Pearson correlation analysis was applied. The results indicated that EL is significantly and positively correlated with employees' outcomes i.e. absenteeism. Additionally, EE was found significantly and positively correlated with employees' outcomes. Conversely, the correlation between EI and employees' outcomes was significantly negative. The diagonal values reflect the square root of AVE values. Since the diagonal values exceed the correlation values, (Fornell and Larcker's,1981) criteria for discriminant validity are confirmed, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Sr.#	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	EL	2.931	0.85	(0.764)			
2	EE	2.313	0.80	0.489**	(0.732)		
3	EI	2.450	0.72	-0.475**	-0.521**	(0.723)	
4	EA	2.313	0.68	-0.531**	-0.562**	0.486**	(0.763)

Note **p<0.001(two-tailed); SD= standard deviation

4.3 Model Fitness and Hypotheses Testing

For the verification of the primary causal mechanisms, direct, mediation, and moderation hypotheses were tested in AMOS using structural equation modeling SEM. The goodness-of-fit statistics, as suggested by (Hu, 1999), determine the extent to which the structural models accurately represent the data and the hypothesized relationships among the variables. According to Table 3, the value of X^2/DF is 1.1875, which is less than 3. Similarly, the values of other fit indicators including RMSEA, CFI, NFI, GFI, and TLI are within the recommended threshold limits. Thus, the results of confirmatory factor analysis for the full measurement model confirmed the empirical model of the study variables along with strong robustness.

Table 3: Model fit Indices for full structure model

Measure	Estimate	Threshold	Interpretation
X^2	2421.652	--	--
DF	210.001	--	--
X^2/DF	1.1875	Between 1 and 3	Excellent
CFI	0.935	>0.93	Excellent
SRMR	0.059	<0.08	Excellent
RMSEA	0.043	<0.06	Excellent
PClose	0.694	>0.05	Excellent
NFI	0.878	>0.90	Acceptable
TLI	0.985	>0.95	Excellent

4.4 The Direct Effects of EL on Employees' Outcome and EE

The EL's direct effect on the dependent variable, i.e employees' absenteeism was analyzed through the SEM model. The results, as reported in Table 4, show that EL has a positive and significant influence on absenteeism, with standardized regression coefficient values for EA being ($\beta = 0.526$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, H2 posits the direct effect of EL on EE. The results conclude that EL has a significant and positive effect on EE ($\beta = 0.479$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, both H1 and H2 are accepted.

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

Table 4: Direct Effects of EL on EA and EE

Predictor	Construct	β	S.E.	P-Value	R ²	Hypothesis
EL	EA	0.526***	0.047	***	0.362	H1 Accepted
EL	EE	0.479***	0.044	***	0.267	H2 Accepted

4.5 Mediation Effects of EE between EL and EA

Hypothesis H3 postulates the mediation relationship between EL and employees' absenteeism through the mediator EE. The coding for conditional indirect effects was conducted in AMOS through bootstrapping of 2000 at a 95% confidence interval to test significance. The conditional indirect paths (EL → EE → EA) are both positive and significant ($\beta = 0.135$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, H3 is supported.

Table 5: Indirect conditional effects of mediation

Parameter	β	Lower	Upper	P	Hypothesis
EL→EE→EA	0.135	-0.028	-0.195	0.001	H3 Accepted

4.6 Moderated Mediation Effects

The moderation relationship, measured in terms of the interaction (EL x EI), exhibits a negative and significant influence ($\beta = -0.075$, $p < 0.01$) on EE. The negative interaction term effect indicates that at a low value of the EI moderator with EL, the association with EE is strongly positive, but at a high value of the EI as moderator, the relationship becomes weaker. The value of the R-square of the overall model is 0.56. The results are reported in Table 6.

Table 6: Moderated Mediation Analysis for EA and EEE between EL and Employee Outcome

Predictor	Outcome	B	S.E.	P	R-Square
LV_EL	LV_EE	0.164***	0.028	***	0.56
LV_EI	LV_EE	-0.623***	0.037	***	
ELxEI	LV_EE	-0.075***	0.039	***	
LV_EE	LV_EA	0.524***	0.047	***	0.23

In the second stage, the conditional indirect effects of moderated mediation analysis were calculated. The conditional indirect path from the interaction term (EL x EI) through EE to EA was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.042$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, the moderated mediation has been validated.

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

Table 7: Conditional Indirect Effects for Moderated Mediation

Parameter	β	Lower	Upper	P	Hypothesis
(ELxEI)→EE→EA	-0.042	-0.08	-0.005	0.026	H4 Accepted

5.1 Discussion

The present research aimed to examine the effects of exploitative leadership (EL) on employees' outcome, i.e. employees' absenteeism (EA). Emotional exhaustion (EE) among employees served as a mediator, while emotional intelligence (EI) functioned as the moderator in this investigation. Following statistical analysis and the application of structural equation modelling (SEM) techniques, the variables in the study demonstrated high levels of validity and reliability, as well as favourable model fit indices. Therefore, applying the Stress, Appraisal, and Coping (SAC) theory, the findings indicated that employees under the influence of EL experienced EE, leading to a positive impact on EA.

This implies that persistent exposure to stress created by EL depletes employees' emotional resources, rendering them incapable of effectively coping with such situations. To manage the stress associated with EE, employees may choose to remain absent from work as a coping strategy, thereby contributing to an increase in absenteeism. Additionally, the study addressed how the mediating variable EE intervenes with the independent variable EL and the outcome variable i.e. EA. The results demonstrated that EL positively influences EA, and this relationship is mediated by EE (Christensen-Salem et al., 2021). This framework provides a unique lens through which to examine the intricate connections between exploitative leadership, emotional intelligence, emotional exhaustion, and employees' absenteeism. Empirical research grounded in this framework can illuminate the complex mechanisms underlying follower responses to exploitative leadership behaviours and their subsequent impact on absenteeism. Insights derived from this framework can inform organizational interventions that prioritize authentic leadership, foster open communication, and encourage creative expression even in challenging environments. However, it is essential to acknowledge several limitations of this study (Guo et al., 2024).

Firstly, the data were collected from the participants through the self-reported questionnaire, this might introduce Common Method Bias (CMB) into the study. Previous studies have expressed concerns about mitigating the potential effects of CMB in similar research (Hansen et al., 2019; Mastekaasa, 2020). Therefore, the suggestion is to acquire data from other sources, such as supervisor and peer reports. Secondly, the current study utilized a time-lag research design, which is not purely longitudinal. Future studies should consider adopting purely longitudinal designs to enhance understanding of the phenomenon. Thirdly, this study relies on the rationale of the theory of stress, appraisal, and coping to examine the roles of EL in absenteeism via EE and EI. Employees perceive EL as a threat to their resources, making these resources scarce to meet job demands. Consequently, employees exhaust their emotional and cognitive resources to cope with the stressor (EL), leading to absenteeism (Ebrahiem et al., 2024). Therefore, future studies should explore other theories to support rationally the impact of EL on the outcome variable under study. Fourthly, the current investigation is conducted in the environment of an underdeveloped country and the information was attained from the employees who are working in the FEPTD, Pakistan.

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

According to (Hofstede insight, 1983) higher power distance and uncertainty avoidance are prominent characteristics of the culture of Pakistan. Therefore, future studies in the field of the dark side of leadership may be suggested to apply such investigation to other cultural settings to logically unveil the various facets of EL and its outcomes. Fifthly, the current research was conducted in a public sector organization. Future studies may focus on both private and public sectors to better understand the consequences of EL on absenteeism.

5.2 Conclusion

It is evident that EL intensifies the process of EE within the FEPTD. The results substantiated the hypotheses related to mediation. Furthermore, the current investigation explored the relationship between EL and EE on EA with the moderating role of EI. The findings indicated that when EI is low, the correlation between EL and EE is high, thereby exacerbating EA. In contrast, the correlation between EL and EE is weaker when EI is high. This suggests that employees with higher EI are better equipped to cope with the stress induced by EL compared to those with lower EI. Consequently, the absenteeism ratio among employees with low EI is expected to be high. Therefore, the hypotheses regarding EI as a moderator are supported.

5.3 Theoretical Contribution

The current investigation contributes significantly to the embryonic field of exploitative leadership by pinpointing novel dimensions of its behavior through the lens of stress, appraisal, and coping (SAC) theory. This research is noteworthy for its ability to substantiate the stress theory, elucidating various facets of EL and their subordinate relationships. The theoretical model of SAC perceives EL as a source of cognitive and emotional stress, and in response to this stress, employees adopt absenteeism as a coping strategy. Thus, the theory provides robust support for the study model and offers a mechanism to elucidate the relationship between EL and employee outcome i.e. EA. Additionally, this study adds value to the leadership literature, particularly in the context of the public sector in Pakistan.

5.4 Managerial Contribution

The findings of the current research indicate that EL has detrimental effects on employees' emotional well-being. Consequently, this research can guide human resources management departments to avoid hiring leaders with EL characteristics in the first place. However, employees should be well-equipped with emotional intelligence strategies to effectively deal with EL. The outcomes of this study will be valuable for the Human Resource Development (HRD) department of FEPTD in organizing training programs for both leaders and subordinates. These programs can enhance their capacity to manage stresses and traumas related to the workplace. The bureaucratic style of leadership in public sector organizations is renowned for contributing to employees' depression and despondency (Amin & Ali, 2022). Therefore, this research can assist policymakers in understanding the genuine role of leaders in Federal Government organizations specifically in the education sector. It can further contribute to formulating institutional strategies and long-term policies aimed at mitigating the negative impact of EL in federal government organizations.

Additionally, this study will be beneficial for training bodies in initiating programs to help

Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

employees cope with stress and manage their emotions. This proactive approach can serve to counteract absenteeism within the workplace.

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Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

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Unmasking the Administrative and Managerial Impact: Investigating Exploitative Leadership on Employee Absenteeism through Cognitive Appraisal

Appendix A

List of Abbreviations

SAC: Stress, Appraisal and coping theory

EL: Exploitative Leadership

EE: Emotional Exhaustion

EI: Emotional Intelligence

EA: Employee Absenteeism

EQ: Emotional Quotient

FEPTD: Federal Education & Professional Training Division

CFA: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

SEM: Structural Equational Modeling

AVE: Average Variance Extracted

Appendix B

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NUA: conceptualization, theory and major contributions in writing the manuscript. RUK: methodology, review, editing, formatting. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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