

From Leadership to Service Behaviour: Tracing Behavioural Spillovers among Providers

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| KEYWORDS <i>Service organization, Despotic leadership, Intimidating behaviour, Ingratiatory behaviour, Police organization..</i> | ABSTRACT <p>Organizations, especially service organizations, are increasingly concerned with the negative practices and behaviours of their leaders and top management. The police force is a leading example of a service-oriented organization where leadership is critical in both internal dynamics and public perception. While the negative or destructive dimensions of leadership and their effects are starting to engage researchers' interest, positive leadership is still the prevalent interest in leadership research. As a hierarchical institution, the police rely heavily on top-down communication, where directives from leadership influence every level of the organization. Despotic leadership refers to negative leadership behaviours and the practice of controlling and dominant behaviour that boosts self-interest, self-motivation, and exploitation of subordinates (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). The present study revolves around despotic leadership in the police department and its role in influencing intimidating behaviours and ingratiatory behaviours among police officers.</p> <p>The research was conducted on police officers working in various districts of Rajasthan. A total of 235 cops (assistant sub-inspectors and above), aged between 28 and 56 years, with a minimum of three years of experience, participated in the study. Correlational and predictive analyses showed that despotic leadership is highly significantly and positively correlated with intimidating and ingratiatory behaviours in police officers. Moreover, despotic leadership was found to significantly contribute to the development of these behaviours among the officers. The study findings underscore that despotic leadership can significantly impact the behaviours of police officers toward the public who they are supposed to serve and their leaders, which contributes to their bad public image. Cultivating positive leadership toward subordinates in police organizations could be an advantage in enhancing the public image of the police. Addressing despotic leadership behaviours may improve both internal dynamics and public perception of the police force.</p> <p>Frequent training programs focusing on leadership should be implemented during induction and at regular intervals to better prepare officers for the demands of their roles. These programs could emphasize the importance of positive leadership and its impact on both organizational outcomes and public trust...</p> |
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1. INTRODUCTION

Having a strong and positive relationship between service industry employees and their supervisors is essential for achieving customer loyalty, satisfaction (Kim et al., 2014), and improved service delivery within the service industry (Chon & Zoltan, 2019). Such relationships foster effective communication, trust, and collaboration, enabling employees to perform at their



best and provide excellent service experiences to customers. Prioritizing supervisor-employee engagement contributes significantly to the success and growth of organizations in this highly customer-centric industry (Yu et al., 2020). Recent research in the service and hospitality industries has increasingly directed its attention to the dark side of leadership (Zhao & Guo, 2019), fuelled by increasing recognition of its negative effect on employees and organizations alike (Aboramadan et al., 2021b). This is a response to a need to examine how toxic leadership can negatively affect employee morale, workplace relationships, and organizational performance. Police organization is an integral part of law enforcement in every country across the globe, which provides safety to the public in the form of protection, care, and welfare (Murad et al., 2021). They are supposed to preserve peace and harmony throughout the nation while dealing with criminal activities. Police have been in close contact with people as compared to other law enforcement agencies, as they are the first ones to respond to it. Police are service-based organizations, and police personnel are expected to serve the public. But in the common public, police have a negative image, and the service orientation expected from them is missing, due to which they are in conflict with the public. They are highly criticized for their behaviour by the public and media, and we often hear stories and news about police misbehaving. Police are not just the leading example of a service-oriented organization but also an example of a strict hierarchical setup where officers in leadership positions play important roles in both internal and external dynamics, which is inside the force between the colleagues and also with the public.

Negative leadership qualities can have a significant impact on turnover, abnormal work behaviour, emotional burnout, employee job dissatisfaction, and job stress (Zafar, 2021). Despotic leadership can be defined as negative leader behaviours and the practice of controlling and dominant behaviour, which focuses on their self-interest, self-motivation, and exploitation of their subordinates (De Hoogh & Den Hartog 2008). The exploitation of employees, personal desires, and the use of dictatorship are some of the highlighted characteristics of despotic leadership (Kasi, Bibi, & Karim, 2020). Having despotic leadership negatively affects employees' motivation, job satisfaction, and on-the-job behaviour, such as organizational citizenship behaviour and counter-productive behaviour. Despotic leadership is an authoritarian, unethical, exploitative, and self-serving behaviour. Therefore, despotic leadership in a very collectivist, insecure, and power-distant culture which lead to employees' emotional exhaustion (Murad et al., 2021).

A recent survey of 8,276 police officers carried out by the Lokniti- Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Common Cause has brought to light worrying trends in the policing practices in India. The survey reports widespread acceptance of force, fear tactics, and extrajudicial actions among police officers. Alarming, the majority of officers believe that intimidation is a valid means of enforcing law and order. Incidents of police malfeasance, such as instances of intimidation directed towards the general public and marginalized communities, are recurrently witnessed in public life and the media (Kumar et al., 2025).

It has long been known that this profession is highly demanding, and cops often deal with stressful situations and pressure from internal and external dynamics. As a result, to deal with the situations, they may embrace strategies such as intimidation and ingratiation behaviours to manage the psychological and emotional strain in their line of duty. Intimidating and ingratiation behaviours can significantly affect the well-being of the officers and the people they serve. Few existing research suggest that many factors contribute to officers' intimidating and ingratiation behaviours. At the individual level occupational stress, traumatic experiences in the line of duty and lack of support from the higher ends in leadership roles may lead police officers to embrace these problematic behaviours to meet the psychological demands of their jobs (Lane et al., 2021; Blumberg et al., 2018; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019; Modise, 2023).

Rationales

Police officers' behaviours have frequently been under scrutiny, and their actions have attracted mass criticism. This edgy rapport between law enforcement officers and the public reflects a clear disconnect in terms of mutual knowledge and confidence. Unfortunately, there is little empirical research analysing why this disconnect exists in the first place. To be specific, there are few, if any, studies that attempt to explain why service values appear to be lacking in most police officers.

It should be noted that these officers were initially regular members of society before their incorporation into the ranks of law enforcers. This poses essential questions: What transforms them in the process of integration into the police force? What experiences influence their attitudes and behaviours in a negative way? Knowledge of factors that lead to this transformation is crucial to solving the issue.

This study seeks to dig further into the causes of such issues, investigating the causative factors that underlie the negative attitudes and actions exhibited by certain police officers. By revealing these findings, the study hopes to lay the groundwork for enhancing the public perception of police and creating a greater sense of service culture within the police department. Eventually, the results might serve to bridge gaps between the communities being policed and the officers, forming a more cohesive and functioning system of policing.

Objectives

Objective of this study is to study police officers' leadership experiences (despotic) and its contribution in developing intimidating and ingratiation behaviour among them.



Hypothesis

H1: Despotic leadership will positively and significantly affect Intimidating Behaviour among police officers.

H2: Despotic leadership will positively and significantly affect Ingratiatory Behaviour among police officers.

Methodology

This is a cross-sectional and correlational study conducted among police personnel of Rajasthan.

Participants

Police officers serving at the rank of assistant sub-inspector (ASI) and above in Rajasthan were taken as participants of the study. Officers at the rank of Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI) and above were approached, and by using a purposive sampling technique, 235 officers were selected as the sample to collect data.

Procedure

Before going in field for data collection appropriate permissions were taken from the concerned authorities. Officers were approached at their respective police stations of various district and a questionnaire were given to them for filling after getting their consent for taking part in the study.

Tools

- Demographic data- Information related to age, gender, education, years of experience, present post, and joined police service will be collected from the respondents.
- Despotic leadership- A scale developed by De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) was used to measure despotic leadership. This is a 5 five-point Likert scale and has a total of six items. The scale has an alpha value of 0.92.
- Ingratiatory behaviour- Measuring Ingratiatory Behaviours in Organizational Settings (MIBOS), developed by Kumar and Beyerlein (1991), was adapted, and 9 out of 24 items with an alpha value of 0.86 were used to measure the ingratiatory behaviour of the officers.
- Intimidating Behaviour- 4 items from the scale Self-Presentation Tactics Scale (SPTS) developed by Lee et al. (1999) were used, with the alpha value of 0.93.

2. RESULTS

Table 1: Results related to correlation analysis explaining the relationship among variables of the study.

| | Intimidating Behaviour | Ingratiatory Behaviour |
|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Despotic leadership | .236** | .216** |

**Correlations are significant at 0.01 level

The results of the correlation analysis show that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between despotic leadership, intimidating behaviour, and ingratiatory behaviour. This implies that officers who are facing more despotic leadership will be exhibiting a corresponding rise in both intimidating and ingratiatory behaviours.

Table 2: Summary of regression analysis of despotic leadership with Intimidating Behaviour

| R | R Square | Change Statistics | | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|------|----------|-------------------|----------|---------------|---------------------------|-------|------|
| | | R Square Change | F Change | Sig. F Change | Beta | | |
| .236 | .056 | .056 | 13.710 | .000 | .236 | 6.079 | .000 |

Table 2 shows the result of regression analysis of the influence of despotic leadership on Intimidating Behaviour. Despotic leadership was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of Intimidating Behaviour (explaining 5.6 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result shows despotic leadership has a positive and significant effect on Intimidating Behaviour and this finding provides support for H1.

**Table 3: Summary of regression analysis of despotic leadership with ingratiation behaviour**

| R | R Square | Change Statistics | | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|------|----------|-------------------|----------|---------------|---------------------------|--------|------|
| | | R Square Change | F Change | Sig. F Change | Beta | | |
| .216 | .047 | .047 | 11.438 | .001 | .216 | 12.609 | .000 |

Table 3 shows the result of regression analysis of the influence of despotic leadership on ingratiation behaviour. Despotic leadership was found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of ingratiation behaviour (explaining 4.7 % of the total variance), as indexed by the R^2 statistic. Thus, the result indicates Despotic leadership's positive and significant effect on ingratiation behaviour. The finding provides support for H2.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The police force is a crucial organization in maintaining law and order in any nation, being the main institution tasked with responding to incidents from minor disagreements to major crimes, natural calamities to manmade mishaps. As they are directly involved with the public, police officers tend to be the first to respond in most situations, and thus their work is essential in ensuring stability in society. Outside their service functions, police officers also work in an extremely hierarchical formal system where rank is explicitly distinguished. Such an organizational structure promotes organized operations by exercising strict control in a chain-of-command style that is adhered to strictly in a manner initiated by high officials and then duly followed by ranks below. That top-down communicative process underlies maintaining harmony within the organization, as this implants the culture of subordination and submission to the protocol given. This hierarchical framework, though critical to operational effectiveness, also informs the dynamics of leadership, decision-making, and accountability within police institutions. Also, this hierarchical and top-down communication affects the internal, i.e., relationship within the organization, and external dynamics (relationship with the public) of the officers.

Earlier studies on police personnel mainly focused on negative and despotic leaderships in the context of organizational job-related stress and burnout (Nelson and Smith, 2016), mental health (Chen et al., 2021), job attitudes and job behaviours such as job satisfaction (Zafar, 2021), emotional exhaustion and anxiety (Nauman et al., 2018), counterproductive work behaviours (Fida et al., 2015). Whereas how despotic leadership influences officers' behaviour towards their higher officials and the public has not been studied much, in this study, we have established an intriguing causal relationship between intimidating and ingratiation behaviours of the officers towards their supervisor and common public.

As the correlation results have shown, despotic leadership has a positive effect on both intimidating and ingratiation behaviours among police officers. That is, police officers who feel they are experiencing a despotic or authoritarian style of leadership, which is marked by dominance and control, will be more inclined to be intimidating, e.g., inducing fear or applying pressure to others. They may also exhibit ingratiation behaviour, which is marked by excessive fawning or manipulative efforts to gain favor and assert dominance. According to DeLong and Reichert (2019), the majority of criminals have been victims of crime; victims do not always turn into criminals. Victimization may have detrimental effects on a person's physical, mental, and behavioural health, and some people may go on to perpetrate crimes of their own. This can be applied to the results of this study, as not all the officers who have experienced despotic leadership turn into ingratiation or intimidating others, but most of them believe intimidation is a powerful tool for law enforcement (Kumar et al., 2025).

The findings regarding the influence of despotic leadership on intimidation practices of police officers have a very dependable pattern. Correlation and regression analysis show a strong positive correlation between despotic leadership and the tendency of the officers to intimidate towards weaker. This corresponds with broader criminological theory, the scapegoat theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), which says that when communities or members of communities face difficulties or problems, they will seek to vent their frustrations against marginalized groups rather than dealing with systemic issues. Hierarchy within police departments reinforces this phenomenon since officers who operate under despotic leadership might employ coercive methods of enforcement, intimidate the weaker groups. Despotism in leadership creates a poisonous workplace where staff members face serious psychological and professional difficulties. Leaders who engage in despotic, authoritarian, and abusive actions destroy the mutual respect and trust that are necessary for a productive and happy work environment. Employees who are exposed to despotic or destructive leadership may suffer as a result; they start imitating the bad habits of their leaders. Employees may start to perceive such acts as the norm if they witness others finding them acceptable. As a result, individuals are more inclined to imitate and display the same aggressive and intimidating tendencies as their leaders. (e.g., Restubog et al., 2011).

The findings related to the influence of despotic leadership on ingratiation behaviours of the police officers towards their superiors have a reliable pattern. Correlation and regression analysis show a strong positive correlation between despotic leadership and the tendency of the officers to behave ingratiatingly towards their higher officials. The victim-turned-offender overlap explains that individuals who have experienced power from the abuser and powerlessness as themselves become the



power user on those who have less power or no power in comparison to them and become agreeable to those who have more power than them (Plummer & Cossins, 2018).

Leadership is central in modelling the attitudes and behaviours of police officers within the institution. Despotic leadership, where there is authoritarian dominance and control, largely contributes to the existence of intimidation and ingratiation conduct among officers. When police leaders support or accept these practices, these behaviours permeate down the ranks, affecting how officers interact with members of the public and their seniors. The public behaviour of police officers—whether intimidating citizens or grovelling in front of officers who are senior to them—is often traced back to top styles in leadership. Organizational culture starts with leaders, and in formal institutions such as the police force, their way of exercising power and control directly influences everyday practice. Understanding these dynamics of leadership is central to understanding their broader implications for law enforcement behaviour, organizational integrity, and public trust in policing institutions.

4. CONCLUSION, ACADEMIC, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

The present study has provided compelling evidence that despotic leadership significantly contributes to the emergence of intimidating and ingratiation behaviours among police officers. In a service-oriented organization such as the police force, where leaders serve not just as supervisors but also as critical architects of organizational culture and public reputation, the consequences of leadership styles are profound. The findings establish that leadership practices characterized by authoritarianism, exploitation, and self-serving motives are not isolated internal matters but have cascading effects on both employee behaviour and public trust. This underscores the urgent need for organizations in the service sector to systematically evaluate and address leadership approaches that may harm both internal employee dynamics and external organizational legitimacy.

Academically, this study contributes to the expanding but still underexplored domain of negative leadership behaviours within service organizations. Much of the existing leadership research has historically focused on positive leadership constructs such as transformational, ethical, or servant leadership. While these frameworks offer valuable insights into ideal leadership practices, they inadvertently create a gap by underemphasizing the dark side of leadership and its tangible impacts. By investigating despotic leadership in the policing context—a highly structured, hierarchically dependent, and public-facing service organization—this study provides critical insights into how destructive leadership styles not only deteriorate organizational climate but also provoke maladaptive coping mechanisms among subordinates. Intimidation and ingratiation, as observed outcomes, are particularly concerning because they represent dysfunctional social behaviours that can further entrench negative leadership cycles, foster toxic work environments, and weaken organizational integrity.

The findings reinforce the necessity for leadership research to adopt a more balanced view that critically examines the full spectrum of leadership behaviours. Understanding how negative leadership develops, sustains itself, and influences follower behaviour is crucial for both theory development and practical intervention. Specifically, within service sector organizations where employees interact directly with the public—such as police, healthcare, and social work, and education—leader behaviour not only affects internal organizational outcomes but also shapes public perceptions of the institution as a whole. Thus, the broader academic implication of this study is the pressing need to integrate theories of destructive leadership into leadership development models, organizational behaviour studies, and public administration research, particularly in service sector settings.

From a policy perspective, the findings carry several important implications for organizational leadership development, employee training, and overall service delivery improvement. First, leadership development within police departments and other service organizations must move beyond traditional command-and-control models that emphasize hierarchy and compliance. While structure and discipline are essential in these organizations, leadership programs must equally emphasize emotional intelligence, ethical conduct, and employee empowerment. Structured leadership development programs should be embedded not only at the initial stages of officer induction but should continue through periodic, mandatory training modules across the career span.

Second, leadership assessment and promotion processes within the police and other service sectors must incorporate behavioural and psychological evaluations aimed at identifying tendencies toward despotic or authoritarian behaviour. Promotions should be contingent not only upon operational competence and tenure but also upon demonstrated leadership behaviours that align with organizational values of fairness, transparency, and respect for subordinates. Implementing 360-degree feedback systems where subordinates can confidentially evaluate their supervisors could provide valuable insights into leadership effectiveness and identify early warning signs of negative leadership patterns.

Third, organizational policies should actively promote a culture of psychological safety where employees feel empowered to report negative leadership behaviours without fear of retaliation. Anonymous reporting mechanisms, independent grievance redressal systems, and regular climate surveys could be employed to monitor and address issues proactively. Establishing clear, enforced policies against abusive and despotic leadership behaviours would not only protect employees but also send a strong message that the organization prioritizes ethical leadership and employee well-being.

Moreover, the findings advocate for an organizational focus on resilience-building among employees. Service organizations,



by their nature, often place employees in high-stress environments where hierarchical pressures can exacerbate unhealthy coping strategies like intimidation and ingratiation. Training programs that focus on emotional resilience, assertive communication, ethical decision-making, and conflict resolution can equip employees to respond constructively to negative leadership behaviours rather than perpetuating the cycle.

Another important policy implication relates to community relations and public image management. In service organizations like the police, the leadership styles internalized within the organization inevitably spill over into public interactions. Officers subjected to despotic leadership may emulate similar behaviours when dealing with citizens, contributing to a deteriorating public image and eroding community trust. Therefore, leadership reform should be considered not merely an internal organizational improvement effort but a critical strategy for enhancing public service quality and rebuilding public confidence. Community policing models, which emphasize partnership, respect, and shared problem-solving between police and communities, should be complemented with internal leadership reforms that model these very principles.

For other service organizations such as hospitals, educational institutions, and social welfare agencies, the study's implications are equally relevant. These sectors depend heavily on interpersonal trust, empathy, and respect—qualities that can be easily undermined by despotic leadership. Organizations must therefore recognize that leadership development is not an ancillary or optional function but a core strategic priority with direct implications for service effectiveness, employee retention, and organizational reputation.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the pervasive yet often overlooked issue of despotic leadership within police organizations and, by extension, other service-oriented institutions. By linking despotic leadership to harmful subordinate behaviours such as intimidation and ingratiation; it calls for a fundamental rethinking of leadership paradigms in service sectors. Academically, it enriches the leadership discourse by advocating for a more nuanced understanding of leadership behaviours. From a policy standpoint, it emphasizes the urgent need for systemic leadership development reforms, behavioural accountability measures, and resilience-building initiatives to foster healthier work environments and enhance public trust. Ultimately, by addressing the roots of negative leadership, service organizations can better fulfil their mission of serving the public with integrity, respect, and excellence.

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