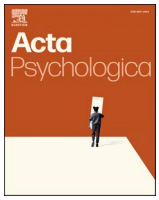
Acta Psychologica 255 (2025) 104971

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Acta Psychologica

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/actpsy



The buffering effect of secure base leadership on the relationship between emotional demands and burnout: A multilevel study among military officer cadets

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Secure base leadership
Burnout
Emotional demands
Military
Officer cadets

ABSTRACT

This study examined the association between Secure Base Leadership (SBL) and burnout among 398 officer cadets at the Spanish Army's General Military Academy in Zaragoza. Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, this research examines both the direct and moderating effects of SBL on the relationship between emotional demands and burnout within a high-stress military training environment. Cadets were organized into 14 sections, each led by a designated supervisor. Using multilevel modeling, the findings reveal that at the individual level (Level 1), higher emotional demands are significantly associated with increased burnout. At the team level (Level 2), cadets who perceive their leaders as a secure base report lower levels of burnout, indicating that SBL functions as a key job resource that mitigates stress-related outcomes. Furthermore, results demonstrate a significant cross-level interaction, whereby SBL moderates the relationship between emotional demands and burnout, attenuating the negative impact of high emotional demands on cadet well-being. These findings extend the JD-R framework by providing empirical evidence of the buffering role of secure base leadership in high-strain educational and occupational settings. The study underscores the critical role of leadership in fostering psychological resilience and suggests practical implications for the development of leadership training programs in military academies aimed at enhancing cadets' capacity to cope with occupational stressors.

1. Introduction

The development of good future leaders is crucial in any organization, but it holds a special significance in the armed forces, where the stakes can be exceptionally high. Positive leadership in the military settings not only influences operational success but also impacts the well-being and morale of the military personnel (Squires & Peach, 2020). In this context, the Army's General Military Academy in Zaragoza (Spain) offers a blend of military and academic education, focusing on disciplines such as military tactics, leadership, strategy, and military law. In addition, cadets receive university-level education that may lead to a degree in Industrial Organization Engineering or other related fields. The training is intensive and designed to prepare cadets not only in the technical and tactical knowledge required to be an officer but also in the physical and psychological aspects of military life. The academy places strong emphasis on leadership skills development and instilling values such as discipline, integrity, and respect.

Training of military officer cadets encompasses not only a rigorous tactical and strategic regimen; it also involves substantial personal development and professional education. Cadets are not only taught to manage weapons and lead military operations – tasks commonly linked to high stress levels (Fulton et al., 2015), but they also face challenges in

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104971
Received 13 December 2024; Received in revised form 27 March 2025; Accepted 31 March 2025
Available online 7 April 2025
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academic and military training even outside of active deployments. Excelling in these areas is crucial as it shapes their future career paths and opportunities in the military. The emotional demands of this training, compounded by continuous pressure, extended working hours, and high expectations can potentially lead to cadets' burnout. This, in turn, might negatively impact their psychological and physical well-being, as well as their overall job performance (Brooks & Greenberg, 2018; Hourani et al., 2006; Martins & Lopes, 2012).

The leadership exercised by officers in charge of cadets may have a protective effect and prevent burnout, as a good leader not only issues orders but also understands the needs and limitations of their subordinates and seeks ways to support them both professionally and personally (Bartone, 2023; Bartone et al., 2007). In particular, leadership within military institutions can be described as the act of delivering the essential purpose, guidance, and enthusiasm required to harness both individual and group human resources, as well as organizational strengths for generating ethical and competent martial force in complex, fluid, and perilous circumstances for the benefit of the sovereign nation represented (Hannah & Sowde, 2012).

While military training is inherently demanding and exhausting, officers (leaders) who adopt positive leadership styles, such as Secure Base Leadership (SBL), can significantly improve their cadets' emotional health and performance. SBL, a leadership style grounded in Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982/1969) focuses on fostering autonomy in subordinates (secure-base support), providing supportive guidance during challenges, and nurturing close, responsive relationships (Molero et al., 2019). This approach to leadership has been explored in correlational studies in both military and civilian contexts. Findings indicate that subordinates' perceptions of leaders as a secure base are associated with more appraisals of a psychological safe environment, higher job satisfaction (Molero et al., 2019), and reduced levels of dehumanization within organizations (Lobato et al., 2023; Moriano et al., 2021).

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides a solid and recognized framework for understanding occupational stress and well-being. According to this model, job demands (such as workload and emotional demands) can deplete employees' psychological resources, potentially resulting in burnout and other negative outcomes. However, this impact can be mitigated through the implementation of job resources, which facilitate adaptation to demands and enhance motivation. Recent revisions of the model emphasize that job demands are not static but evolve dynamically based on working conditions and individual coping strategies (Bakker et al., 2023). Within this perspective, leadership is highlighted as a crucial job resource, influencing employees' perceptions of and responses to job demands over time. In the present study, the emotional demands associated with military training are identified as a significant stressor that may contribute to burnout among officer cadets.

In this context, SBL emerges as a critical resource, providing psychological support and a sense of security that helps cadets manage these challenges. From the JD-R perspective, SBL is expected not only to directly reduce burnout but also to moderate the relationship between emotional demands and burnout, buffering its negative effects.

Furthermore, cadets' perception of their leader as a secure base is conceptualized as a job resource, akin to perceived social support at the group level, which may mitigate the adverse effects of training demands. Against this theoretical backdrop, the present study aims to examine the moderating effect of SBL on the relationship between training-related emotional demands and burnout among military officer cadets, adopting a multilevel perspective.

1.1. Theoretical background

Professional chronic exhaustion, commonly referred to as burnout, has garnered increasing attention in the realms of occupational and mental health over the past decades. In general, burnout syndrome represents an individual's reaction to prolonged work-related stress, encompassing a subjective encounter with negative implications that adversely impact cognitive, emotional, and attitudinal facets. Maslach and Jackson (1981) meticulously defined burnout as a psychological syndrome marked by (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalization, and (3) a diminished sense of professional efficacy. Emotional exhaustion is the sensation of being mentally depleted due to work demands, often manifesting as weariness, fatigue, and a general sense of depletion. This results in a decreased capacity to adapt to the work environment due to insufficient emotional resources. Depersonalization, or cynicism, involves a growing sense of detachment, indifference, and apathy towards one's work and its recipients. This detachment is often reflected in negative attitudes, inappropriate behaviors, irritability, loss of idealism, and a tendency to avoid interpersonal interactions, especially with service users or clients. Reduced sense of professional efficacy, the third dimension, is characterized by a negative self-evaluation in the professional context, including doubting one's competence and a tendency to perceive professional outcomes pessimistically. These perceptions often lead to decreased productivity, lowered morale, and diminished coping abilities. The impact of burnout extends beyond the individual, detrimentally influencing the organizations they are part of. While these consequences are initially psychological, they can progressively lead to adverse physical, biological, and behavioral effects in employees, culminating in suboptimal organizational outcomes (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Particularly noteworthy is the study of burnout within military environments. Given the inherently high-risk, emotionally charged nature of military tasks, the potential for burnout is considerably exacerbated (Mohammad, 2012; Rusu, 2020). This risk is especially salient for military officer cadets, who face not only the ordinary stressors of military life but also the additional pressures associated with their specialized training programs. These challenges often culminate in elevated levels of occupational stress and a heightened risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Fulton et al., 2015). Additional stressors in military occupations come from ancillary roles and responsibilities, which significantly impact emotional well-being and job performance (Brooks & Greenberg, 2018; Hourani et al., 2006; Martins & Lopes, 2012). This effect is particularly pronounced when future military career prospects are contingent upon performance during the training period.

As outlined by JD-R theory, burnout is not an isolated phenomenon but rather the result of a complex interplay between situational and emotional demands within the work environment. These demands—including high workload, time pressures, and emotionally charged interactions—act as stressors that deplete an individual's psychological and physical resources, thereby increasing the risk of burnout. Among these, emotional demands represent a specific type of job demand that can drain workers' mental and emotional energy over time (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2023).

It is necessary to distinguish between emotional demands and emotional dissonance. Emotional demands refer to the sustained emotional effort required in workplace interpersonal interactions, emphasizing the quantitative aspect of emotional exertion. In contrast, emotional dissonance reflects a qualitative misalignment between internal emotions and externally expressed emotions, creating a discrepancy that leads to psychological strain (Elfenbein, 2023). Considering both constructs jointly can provide valuable insights, as they collectively shape the emotional regulation efforts required in demanding work environments. The need to regulate emotions—whether due to high emotional demands or the suppression of genuine feelings (dissonance)—can intensify psychological strain and negatively impact well-being (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). By acknowledging the interconnected nature of these constructs, researchers can develop a more nuanced understanding of the emotional burden experienced in high-stress contexts, such as military training.

Grounded in job stress theory and emotional regulation theory, emotional demands are categorized along three dimensions: frequency

of emotional expression, intensity of emotional expression, and emotional control (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Xanthopoulou et al., 2013). From an occupational perspective, these demands are often a consequence of frequent emotionally charged interpersonal interactions within the work environment (de Jonge et al., 2008; Steinberg & Figart, 1999). Such demands have been associated with negative outcomes, including work-related stress and burnout.

In the military context, emotional demands are particularly elevated due to the inherent nature of the work, which involves high-risk scenarios, exposure to trauma, and the necessity for maintaining optimal performance under highly stressful conditions (Bartone, 2006). This is especially pertinent for military officer cadets, who are in a unique phase of their careers where they are being trained for leadership roles yet still encounter many of the stressors that seasoned soldiers face. These cadets often grapple with the dual challenges of academic rigor and practical military training, leading to a complex array of emotional demands. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Perceived emotional demands will be positively associated with burnout among military officer cadets.

Continuing to build upon the JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2023), this study highlights the critical role of leadership as a key job resource in mitigating the effects of emotional demands on burnout among military officer cadets. According to the JD-R theory, job resources are aspects of the job that help to achieve work goals, reduce job demands and the associated psychological costs, and stimulate personal growth and development. In the context of military training, positive forms of leadership, such as SBL, play a crucial role in buffering against burnout. This leadership style excels in establishing a climate of psychological safety, thereby enabling individuals to express themselves without apprehension of negative repercussions. Moreover, by fostering close, individualized relationships with each follower, this approach counters organizational dehumanization (Lobato et al., 2023; Moriano et al., 2021).

SBL draws its foundational principles from Bowlby's attachment theory (1982/1969), which underlines the critical role of warm, responsive, and supportive relationship partners for well-being and health. This theory was initially conceived to explain the crucial role that caregivers' provisions of both a safe haven of comfort and relief in times of distress and a secure base for exploration and learning play in fostering optimal child development. These core ideas have been subsequently extended to adult relationships, where the need for a safe haven and secure base continues to shape the dynamics and quality of dyadic interactions in friendships and romantic relationships as well as leader-subordinates exchanges in organizational contexts (Bowlby, 1982/1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2023). Building upon this theoretical foundation, leaders' provision of a safe haven and secure base has emerged as a key construct for fostering followers' psychological well-being in organizational settings. Empirical research has found that this leadership style is positively associated with psychological well-being and contributes to the reduction of stress and burnout among followers (Fein et al., 2020; Lobato et al., 2023; Molero et al., 2013; Moriano et al., 2021).

In light of our research focus, we propose that the three criteria that define SBL – secure-base provision, safe-haven provision, proximity maintenance (Molero et al., 2019) hold particular relevance for military officer cadets. First, by acting as a *secure base* for exploration and learning, the officer provides the cadets with the encouragement and support needed to confidently deal with training-related challenges and goals. Second, as a *safe haven* of comfort and relief, the leader offers cadets a sense of calm and reassurance during training-related threatening situations and emotionally charged interpersonal interactions. Finally, through *proximity maintenance*, the officer allows cadets to readily seek guidance and clarification, fostering a psychologically safe and supportive training environment. When these criteria are met, the commanding officer becomes a figure who is attuned to the needs of their cadets, facilitating the development of autonomy, reinforcing achievements, and enhancing self-esteem. This, in turn, creates a virtuous cycle where cadets are more likely to seek guidance and support, forging positive emotional bonds, and better equipping them for future military roles.

Expanding on our theoretical framework, we hypothesize that SBL exerts a cross-level moderating effect, influencing individual burnout within a team context. Particularly in high-stress environments such as military training, teams do not function merely as collections of individuals but as cohesive units where leadership dynamics significantly shape members' psychological experiences. In these settings, SBL fosters a collective sense of psychological safety and mutual support, reinforcing its well-documented role in promoting resilience against occupational stress (Lobato et al., 2023; Moriano et al., 2021; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2024; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2025).

According to JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2023), job resources such as SBL serve a dual function: they not only have a direct protective effect by enhancing well-being but also moderate the relationship between job demands and burnout, reducing the psychological strain imposed by highly demanding environments. When leaders provide a secure base, a safe haven, and maintain proximity, they create conditions in which subordinates perceive emotionally demanding situations as more manageable, rather than overwhelming stressors. This buffering effect helps weaken the direct link between emotional demands and burnout, ultimately mitigating its negative consequences (Molero et al., 2019; Moriano et al., 2021; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2025).

Attachment theory suggests that leaders help subordinates develop coping strategies and mitigate stress, particularly in crises that disrupt leader–follower relationships (Hinojosa et al., 2020; Mayseless & Popper, 2019). In the military context, military personnel who perceive their leader as a secure base are more likely to reframe emotional challenges as surmountable obstacles rather than insurmountable threats (Lobato et al., 2023; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2024). This shift in perception is critical in mitigating burnout risk, as it prevents cadets from feeling overwhelmed by the emotional strain inherent in their training.

Additionally, SBL fosters close and supportive relationships, which may counteract the dehumanizing effects often associated with high-stress environments (Lobato et al., 2023; Moriano et al., 2021). The hierarchical nature of military institutions can sometimes create psychological distance between leaders and subordinates, exacerbating feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion. However, when leadership is perceived as emotionally available and supportive, this perception reduces the likelihood of burnout by strengthening interpersonal connections and providing cadets with a reliable source of emotional support.

In light of these considerations, we expect that cadets who perceive high levels of SBL will experience a weaker relationship between emotional demands and burnout, as their leader provides the psychological resources necessary to cope with the challenges of training. This moderating effect reinforces the idea that leadership can shape not only individual experiences but also broader team dynamics, creating an environment in which stressors have a diminished impact on well-being. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2. SBL exercised at the team level will have a negative cross-level direct effect on individual-level burnout.

H3. SBL exercised at the team level will have a cross-level interaction (moderator effect) between emotional demands and individual-level burnout.

Fig. 1 summarizes the proposed theoretical model and the formulated hypotheses. This figure depicts a multilevel process in which SBL at the team level cascades down to affect individual-level outcomes. Specifically, the model illustrates how SBL serves as a buffer against

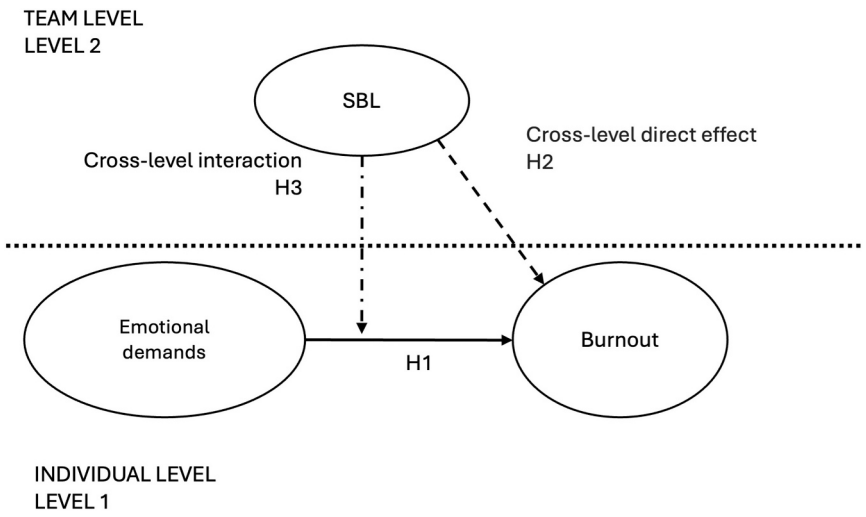

Fig. 1. Model framework of the study.
Notes: SBL, Secure Base Leadership; H1 represents the direct relationship between emotional demands and burnout at the individual level (Level 1); H2 represents the direct cross-level effect of leadership (SBL) on burnout; H3 represents the cross-level interaction effect of leadership (SBL) on the relationship between emotional demands and burnout. Dotted line represents Level 1 (Individual Level) and Level 2 (Team Level) separation.

individual burnout by modulating the relationship between emotional demands and individual burnout within a team context.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 398 officer cadets from the Army's General Military Academy in Zaragoza (Spain) distributed across 14 sections (minimum 27–maximum 34). The mean age was 21 years (SD = 2.4), with 84 % male and 16 % female participants. The cadets had an average tenure at the academy of 2.56 years (SD = 0.78) and an average military service duration of 2.9 years (SD = 1.53). Participants were primarily in their second (54 %) and third (46 %) year of study. The mean duration under their current commanding officer was 5.47 months (SD = 1.64), with 90 % of these officers being male.

The inclusion criteria were: (a) active enrollment as a cadet, (b) assignment to the second or third year, and (c) voluntary participation in the study. First-year cadets were excluded due to their limited experience at the academy and minimal interaction with their commanding officers. These criteria ensured a representative sample of cadets with adequate exposure to both the military training environment and their leadership structure.

Prior to participation, cadets were provided with an informed consent document, ensuring voluntariness, anonymity, and confidentiality in data processing. This study is part of a larger research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, titled 'The Leader as a Secure Base in the Military Context: A Multilevel, Longitudinal, and Cross-cultural Analysis' (PID 2020-117780GB-100). Data collection was conducted in collaboration with academy commanders, and cadets were thoroughly briefed on the study's scientific objectives, reassured of their voluntary participation, and guaranteed full confidentiality of their responses.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Burnout syndrome

Burnout syndrome was assessed using the 15-item Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS) (Schaufeli et al., 1996), adapted for the Spanish population by Salanova et al. (2000). This instrument evaluates three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (e.g., "*I feel emotionally drained by my job*"), cynicism (e.g., "*I have become less enthusiastic about my job*"), and professional efficacy (e.g., "*I can effectively solve problems that arise in my job*"). Responses were recorded on a frequency scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always).

The reliability of the MBI-GS was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's omega (ω). The emotional exhaustion dimension demonstrated high reliability (α = 0.87, ω = 0.87), exceeding the values reported by Salanova et al. (2000) (α = 0.85). The cynicism dimension showed acceptable reliability (α = 0.77, ω = 0.78), although slightly lower than in the original study (α = 0.84). For professional efficacy, reliability was moderate (α = 0.75, ω = 0.75), slightly higher than that reported by Salanova et al. (2000) (α = 0.73), indicating a consistent internal structure.

For analytical purposes, the scores from these three dimensions were averaged to create a single burnout index, in line with theoretical reviews supporting the conceptualization of burnout as a latent variable underlying these three dimensions (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Recent meta-analytic evidence by De Beer et al. (2024), based on 109 samples and 56,593 participants, indirectly supports this decision, reporting notably high correlations among the dimensions, especially between exhaustion and cynicism (corrected correlation: $r = 0.75$). This decision aligns with our multilevel model, in which burnout is modeled at Level 1 (individuals) and predicted by emotional demands (Level 1), while leadership (Level 2) exerts a cross-level effect.

The use of a single burnout index is particularly relevant in this sample, as cadets operate within a rigid hierarchical structure and face simultaneous academic and military demands, increasing the likelihood that burnout manifests as a generalized experience rather than distinct processes. In multilevel models, employing a single aggregated measure ensures that both individual- and group-level effects can be interpreted more coherently, preventing the fragmentation of variance into highly interrelated subdimensions (Geldhof et al., 2014).

When considering burnout as a unidimensional construct, overall reliability was high (α = 0.87, ω = 0.87), supporting the internal consistency of the scale in its aggregated form. These strong reliability indicators reinforce the decision to employ a single burnout index, ensuring a robust and interpretable assessment within this study.

2.2.2. Emotional demands

Emotional demands were assessed using six items from the Bakker et al. (2003) scale, originally developed by van Veldhoven et al. (2002), supplemented with one additional item from the Frankfurt Emotional Work Scale (FEWS) (Zapf et al., 1999), validated for the Spanish

population by Ortiz Bonnín et al. (2012). This additional item, "*At work, I often have to hide how I really feel*," captures emotional dissonance as a key aspect of workplace emotional regulation.

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Always). The overall score was computed as the average of the seven items. Reliability was acceptable, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.71$) and McDonald's omega ($\omega = 0.70$).

2.2.3. SBL

To assess cadets' perceptions of their commanding officer as a secure base leader, we employed the 15-item Leader as Security Provider Scale (LSPS) (Molero et al., 2019). Both the scale instructions and items were adapted to specifically refer to cadets' direct commanding officer (e.g., "*When I need help at work, I look to my leader*"). Participants rated their agreement with each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Not at all in agreement) to 4 (Totally in agreement). The overall score was computed as the mean of the 15 items. Reliability was high, with Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.92$) and McDonald's omega ($\omega = 0.92$), closely aligning with the original reliability of the instrument ($\alpha = 0.95$; Molero et al., 2019).

2.3. Procedure

Firstly, internal consistencies (α: Cronbach's Alpha and ω: McDonald's Omega) were calculated, as well as means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables using the individual database through IBM Statistics SPSS v27.

Subsequently, our hypotheses were tested through multilevel models or hierarchical linear models. Initially, the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) was verified in the context of multilevel analysis for the dependent or criterion variable considered in this study, namely, burnout. The ICC calculation is carried out in a null model or a one-way random effects ANOVA model (Model 0), taking burnout as the outcome variable. This model is an initial or baseline model in which it is assumed that intercepts vary randomly across groups (Romá, 2008), allowing the total variance to be decomposed into within-team variance and between-team variance. Conceptually, it is interpreted as a measure of non-independence (Bliese, 2000).

In addition to this null model, three more models were tested following a step-by-step procedure. First, the random regression coefficients model (Model 1) was tested. In this model, the random coefficients remain as free parameters that can vary between the individual level and team level. Emotional demands were the predictor included in this multilevel equation. This model provides information regarding the dependent variable at level 1 (i.e., burnout) taking into account the aggregated structure of the data and controlling for the covariances at the individual level. The second model evaluated, the intercepts-as-outcomes model (Model 2), addresses the cross-level direct effect. This model analyzes the aggregated perceptions of the 14 sections at a cross-level between SBL (level 2) and burnout experienced by cadets at an individual level (level 1), controlling for the relationship between emotional demands and burnout. Finally, the intercepts and slopes as outcomes model (Model 3) was carried out to address the cross-level interaction. In this model, the moderating effect of the level 2 predictor variable (SBL) on the relationship between level 1 variables (i.e., emotional demands and burnout) is estimated.

To assess the model fit, the statistics −2 Log Likelihood (−2LL), Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) were used. These measures are utilized to evaluate and compare statistical models, particularly in the context of complex models like mixed-effects or multiple regressions. These estimators should represent an improvement by incorporating variables in each model. Therefore, when testing each hypothesized model, these estimators should decrease, indicating the improved fit of each model (Bosker & Snijders, 2011).

3. Results

The descriptive statistics of the variables, as well as their correlations, are presented in Table 1. SBL showed a moderate mean score ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.69$). Burnout levels among participants were low ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 0.53$), and emotional demands were reported as moderately high ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.60$). The correlation analysis revealed significant relationships. A notable negative correlation existed between SBL and burnout ($r = -0.30$, $p < .01$), suggesting that greater SBL is associated with lower burnout levels. Additionally, a weaker but significant negative correlation was found between SBL and emotional demands ($r = -0.14$, $p < .01$). A moderate positive correlation between emotional demands and burnout ($r = 0.37$, $p < .01$) was also observed. These correlations align with the study's proposed hypotheses, indicating that SBL might be associated with reduced burnout and lower appraisals of emotional demands experienced in military training environments.

With respect to the models analyzed, the results of Model 0 (null model) for the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) indicate the proportion of variance in burnout attributable to differences between sections. In our case, the ICC value is 2 % (within-team: $\beta = 0.275$; $p < .001$; between-team: $\beta = 0.005$; $p = .398$). While this is a relatively low coefficient, it does not invalidate the use of a multilevel analysis, particularly when the data are hierarchically structured, and the goal is to understand effects operating at different levels of clustering.

The decision to employ a multilevel model should not be based solely on ICC values, as ignoring the hierarchical structure of the data can lead to biased estimates and incorrect conclusions (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Several studies emphasize that even with low ICC values, multilevel modeling remains essential for accounting for data dependencies and avoiding inflated Type I error rates. For instance, Beal and Dawson (2007) highlight that the use of Likert-type scales and measurement constraints at lower levels can artificially suppress ICC values, leading to an underestimation of between-group variance and, consequently, an incorrect assessment of the need for a multilevel model. Similarly, Devine et al. (2024) argue that ICC should not be the sole criterion for determining whether a multilevel model is appropriate, as neglecting clustering effects can result in underestimated variance and misleading inferences, especially when organizational structures influence individual responses. Furthermore, Hsu et al. (2016) demonstrate that multilevel structural equation models remain valid at ICC values as low as 0.09, reinforcing that even minimal variations between groups can significantly impact model fit and validity.

Given that our dataset consists of 398 cadets nested within 14 section leaders, it is methodologically justified to apply a multilevel approach to appropriately model this hierarchical structure. While the ICC value indicates limited between-group variability, failing to account for nested effects could obscure critical insights into how section-level leadership influences burnout among cadets. Thus, implementing a multilevel model ensures that both within- and between-group effects are properly accounted for, enhancing the robustness, reliability, and interpretability of our findings.

Continuing with the multilevel analysis of burnout as the outcome variable, the results reveal significant findings across four progressively adjusted models (Table 2).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations matrix.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3
1 SBL	2.02	0.69			
2 Burnout	1.06	0.53	−0.30**		
3 Emotional demands	2.42	0.60	−0.14**	0.37**	–

Note. $N = 398$ at the individual level; ** $p < .01$.
Abbreviations: SBL, Secure Base Leadership; *SD*, Standard Deviation.

Table 2
Multilevel models for burnout as outcome variable.

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	B (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)
Fixed effect				
Intercept	1.06 (0.03)***	1.07 (0.03)***	1.06 (0.03)***	1.06 (0.02)***
ED		0.31 (0.004)***	0.29 (0.04)***	0.28 (0.04)***
Cross-level direct level effect				
SBL			−0.21 (0.04)***	−0.20 (0.04)***
Cross-level interaction				
ED * SBL				−0.19 (0.06)**
FIT INDEX				
−2LL	624.84	579.50	553.08	545.71
AIC	628.84	583.50	559.08	551.71
BIC	636.80	591.46	571.01	563.63

Note. $N = 398$ at the individual level. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$
Abbreviations: β, regression coefficient; *SE*, standard error; SBL, Secure Base Leadership; ED, Emotional Demands.

3.1. Model 0 (null model)

This baseline model includes only the intercept, serving as a reference for subsequent comparisons. The estimated intercept was 1.06 (SE = 0.03, $p < .001$), representing the average level of burnout within the sample.

3.2. Model 1

The introduction of emotional demands (ED) as a fixed effect demonstrated that this variable was a significant predictor of burnout ($\beta = 0.307$, SE = 0.042, $p < .001$). This finding supports Hypothesis 1, indicating that higher perceived emotional demands are associated with increased burnout levels among cadets. The model fit improved significantly compared to Model 0 ($\chi^2 = 45.34$, $p < .001$), confirming that incorporating emotional demands enhances the explanatory power of the model.

3.3. Model 2

The inclusion of SBL as a cross-level predictor revealed a significant negative association between SBL and burnout ($\beta = -0.205$, SE = 0.036, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. This result indicates that when leaders provide higher levels of a secure base, a safe haven, and maintain proximity at the team level, individual burnout among cadets within the team decreases. The model fit improvement was statistically significant compared to Model 1 ($\chi^2 = 26.42$, $p < .001$), further validating the relevance of SBL as a protective factor against burnout.

3.4. Model 3

This model introduced the interaction between emotional demands (ED) and SBL, revealing a significant negative interaction effect ($\beta = -0.186$, SE = 0.055, $p < .01$). This interaction supports Hypothesis 3, indicating that the association between emotional demands and burnout is contingent on the level of perceived SBL at the team level. Specifically, when SBL was perceived as lower, the positive relationship between emotional demands and burnout was stronger (simple slope $\beta = 0.44$, $p < .01$), whereas when SBL was higher, this relationship was weaker (simple slope $\beta = 0.18$, $p < .01$). In other words, leaders who were perceived as providing higher levels of a secure base, a safe haven, and maintaining proximity mitigated the negative impact of training-related emotional demands on cadets' burnout (see Fig. 2).

The fit of this model, which includes the cross-level interaction, was better than the fit of Model 2 ($\chi 2 = 26.42$, $p < .001$). In terms of fit indices, both AIC and BIC decreased across the models, supporting the progressive improvement in model fit.

Findings displayed in Fig. 3 show the importance of considering both individual factors (such as emotional demands) and aspects of the team context (such as secure base leadership) in understanding burnout. The significant interaction between emotional demands and SBL suggests that effective leadership strategies could mitigate the adverse effects of emotional demands on the well-being of Army's General Military Academy cadets.

4. Discussion

Our study sheds light on the significant role of leadership within the high-pressure environment of military training, as seen in institutions like the Army's General Military Academy in Zaragoza (Spain). We acknowledge, as outlined in our introduction, that training military officers involves a sophisticated mix of tactical instruction alongside personal and professional development. This intensive training, though crucial for equipping officers for the diverse challenges of military service, also brings with it considerable emotional demands. Our findings suggest that these demands, arising from rigorous academic and military training, may contribute to burnout, potentially affecting the well-being and performance of officer cadets (Hourani et al., 2006; Martins & Lopes, 2012).

Although the mean level of burnout in our sample was relatively low (M = 1.06, SD = 0.53), this does not invalidate the significant relationships observed between burnout, emotional demands, and Secure Base Leadership (SBL). Our study does not aim to diagnose burnout syndrome but rather to analyze variability in burnout levels and their association with relevant predictors in a high-stress military training context. The relatively low burnout levels observed align with previous research on military populations, where a systematic review reported a moderate prevalence of burnout, with median rates of high emotional exhaustion (19 %), high depersonalization (14 %), and low personal accomplishment (6.4 %), suggesting that severe burnout is relatively uncommon in these settings (Hosseini et al., 2023). This aligns with findings that structured, resilience-focused environments, such as military academies, may mitigate extreme burnout levels compared to civilian workplaces, warranting a nuanced interpretation of its effects. Additionally, research on West Point graduates highlights modifiable psychological resilience factors that help individuals persevere under stress, reinforcing the importance of considering burnout within the broader framework of stress management and leadership in military training (Thomas et al., 2021).

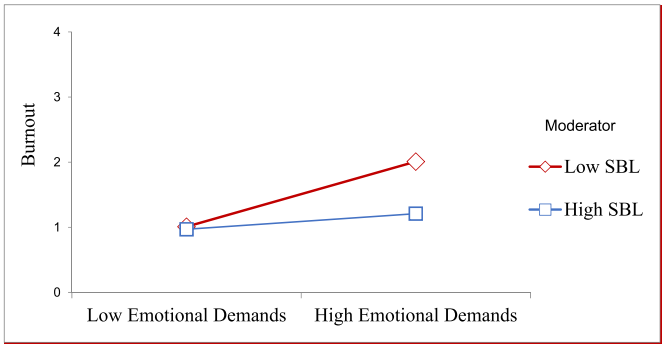

Fig. 2. Moderation effect. SBL dampens the positive relationship between Emotional Demands and Burnout.
Note: SBL, Secure Base Leadership.

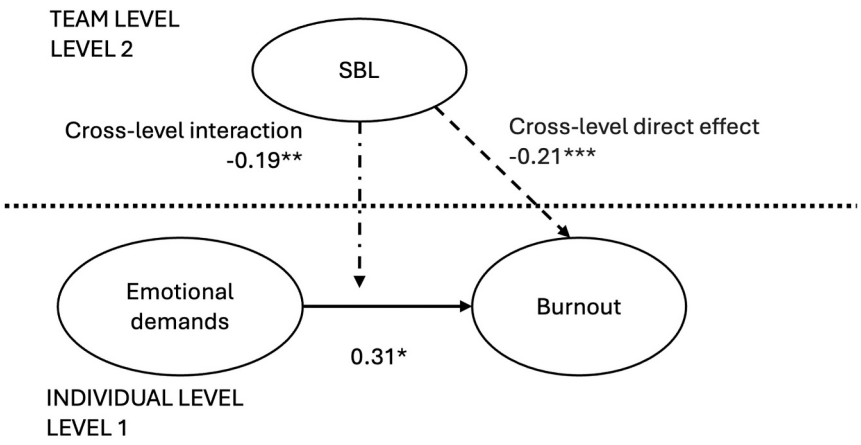

Fig. 3. Final model of coefficients for the dependent variable.
Notes: $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$. SBL: Secure Base Leadership.

As our results indicate, SBL leadership plays a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of these emotional demands. This finding is especially relevant in military settings, where the stakes are high and the impact of leadership extends beyond operational success to the well-being and morale of military personnel (Bartone et al., 2007; Squires & Peach, 2020). The protective effect of SBL against burnout aligns with the notion that effective leaders do more than issue orders; they understand and support the needs and concerns of their subordinates. This support is not just professional but extends to personal aspects, creating a psychologically safe environment that fosters emotional health and job satisfaction (Bartone, 2023; Lobato et al., 2023; Moriano et al., 2021). Beyond its direct effects on well-being, SBL can also function as a key resource that enhances self-regulation in high-stress environments. Research on self-regulation and burnout has shown that people with greater access to work resources develop better coping mechanisms, reducing emotional exhaustion over time (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). This aligns with our findings, as cadets who perceived higher levels of SBL reported lower levels of burnout, indicating that leadership plays a crucial role in shaping emotion regulation strategies in high-demand contexts such as military academies. The concept of SBL, as explored in our study, resonates deeply with the military academy's emphasis on instilling values such as discipline, integrity, and respect. This style of leadership, which has been found to have positive psychological implications for subordinates in both military and civilian settings (e.g., Lobato et al., 2023; Moriano et al., 2021), seems to be crucial in navigating the high stressful demands of military training. It provides the necessary guidance and enthusiasm, harnessing individual, and group resources for the benefit of the military officer cadets (Hannah & Sowde, 2012).

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical role of SBL in managing the challenges of military training. As future officers are prepared for the technical, tactical, and psychological aspects of military life, the leadership skills imparted to them are pivotal. These skills not only contribute to their personal and professional transformation but also play a fundamental role in preventing burnout and enhancing overall well-being and performance. The insights from this study offer valuable implications for military training programs, emphasizing the need for fostering leadership styles that support and understand the emotional demands faced by officer cadets.

5. Limitations and implications

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the examined variables. While our findings suggest that SBL moderates the relationship between emotional demands and burnout in military cadets, this is consistent with previous research reporting significant correlations between SBL and burnout (Fein et al., 2020; Moriano et al., 2021; Navas-Jiménez et al., 2025). However, longitudinal studies are needed to clarify this relationship in military contexts, assessing the progression of burnout and the long-term impact of leadership on stress regulation and well-being.

Second, the sample consists exclusively of cadets from a single military academy, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other military contexts or populations with different organizational and cultural characteristics. While SBL principles may be applicable across various military training institutions, conducting comparative studies across different academies and branches of the armed forces would provide a more robust foundation for extrapolating the findings.

Third, this study relies on self-reported measures, which, despite their adequate psychometric properties validated in Spain, may introduce response biases such as social desirability or subjective perception errors. Although validated instruments with strong reliability were used, future research should consider mixed-method approaches to triangulate findings. Incorporating third-party assessments (e.g., supervisors or peers), qualitative interviews, or physiological stress indicators could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, since this study focuses on subordinates' perceptions of their supervisors as secure bases, future research should include self-assessments from supervisors to offer a more holistic perspective on SBL and its impact on burnout in military settings.

Furthermore, although in this study burnout was operationalized as a global construct based on theoretical considerations and methodological parsimony, this approach may constrain the understanding of its diverse manifestations across individuals. Future research should investigate distinct burnout profiles, as conceptualized by Leiter and Maslach (2016) through latent profile analysis, which enables the identification of subpopulations based on unique combinations of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. This person-centered approach may provide a more nuanced understanding of how SBL relates to specific burnout configurations, potentially informing more tailored and effective interventions in demanding organizational settings such as the military.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the applicability of the JD-R model in military contexts, underscoring leadership as a key resource in mitigating the impact of emotional demands on burnout. Additionally, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on SBL, suggesting its relevance in high-demand environments. The results indicate that leadership that provides a secure base, a safe haven, and maintains proximity not only enhances individual well-being but also shapes collective performance, offering a framework for future research on SBL's influence on group dynamics and

organizational functioning within the military.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need to promote leadership training programs that equip officers with strategies to provide a secure foundation for subordinates. Training officers in emotionally supportive leadership could help reduce burnout among trainees and improve their long-term well-being. Additionally, military academies could implement early detection mechanisms for burnout and provide psychological support to cadets experiencing high stress levels.

Furthermore, these findings could inform institutional policies aimed at fostering a leadership culture that prioritizes emotional support and psychological safety. Implementing such strategies would not only help reduce burnout but also contribute to a healthier and more productive organizational climate. Integrating these principles into military leadership training could enhance officers' ability to manage teams in high-pressure situations, ultimately improving both operational efficiency and personnel well-being.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence supporting the role of SBL in mitigating burnout in military environments, in line with the JD-R theory. Leaders who serve as a secure base, act as a safe haven, and maintain proximity create psychologically safe environments that enable military personnel to manage stress and transform emotional demands into surmountable challenges. Our findings not only confirm the protective effect of SBL on burnout but also reveal its ability to moderate the negative impact of emotional demands. These results call for the integration of attachment-based leadership strategies into military training programs, equipping future officers with the tools necessary to enhance both their well-being and operational effectiveness in facing the challenges of military service.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

María C. Navas-Jiménez: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ana Laguía:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Patricia Recio:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Carlos García-Guiu:** Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Alberto Pastor:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Sergio Edú-Valsania:** Writing – original draft, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Fernando Molero:** Writing – original draft, Resources, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mario Mikulincer:** Writing – original draft, Methodology. **Juan A. Moriano:** Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Informed consent statement

This study followed a model of implicit (or passive) informed consent, in accordance with national legislation and institutional guidelines. Participants received a study information document at the beginning of the questionnaire, and their voluntary completion was understood as consent to participate.

Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the National University of Distance Education (Reference: 16-PSI-2021, approval date: September 30, 2022).

Funding

This research was funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation, project reference AEI/10.13039/501100011033 under the project titled EL LIDER COMO BASE SEGURA EN EL AMBITO MILITAR: UN ANALISIS MULTINIVEL, LONGITUDINAL Y TRANSCULTURAL.

María C. Navas-Jiménez is a doctoral student in the Biomedical and Public Health Sciences program at the National University of Distance Education (UNED). She is supported by a predoctoral research contract granted by the Spanish Ministry of Education (FPU21/02987) for University Teaching Staff Training.

Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the participants for their collaboration in this study.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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