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Shadows in the Office: Understanding the Effects of Dark Triad Personalities in the Workplace

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Abstract

Certain detrimental personality traits, such as the Dark Triad—a constellation of subclinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy with their shared characteristics of low empathy, honesty, and agreeableness — disrupt workplace relationships and foster negative outcomes, significantly predicting harmful workplace dynamics (Braun, 2017; DeShong et al., 2015; O’Boyle et al., 2012; Southard et al., 2015). Despite significant progress in understanding the Dark Triad, much remains to be clarified about their full impact on workplace dynamics, particularly how they interact with contextual factors like workplace climate and organizational structure. One essential aspect hereby is counterproductive work behavior (CWB), referring to a broad range of behaviors that harm or hinder the organization or its employees. This includes theft, sabotage, absenteeism, poor performance, and any behavior that goes against the goals of the organization. CWB can stem from a variety of factors, such as stress, dissatisfaction, or poor organizational culture. Yet, it can also be rooted in one’s Dark Triad levels: Both narcissism and psychopathy are linked to higher levels of CWB; Machiavellianism appears to lack a consistent relationship with such behaviors, potentially due to its strategic nature (Uysal et al., 2023). This symposium aims to examine the relationships between Dark Triad tendencies, the workplace, and work behavior, resulting in new insights into how the Dark Triad manifests in various organizational and cultural settings and how these traits affect individual and collective behaviors at work. Thus, this symposium is crucial for advancing our understanding of the negative effects that dark personality traits can have on workplace environments, as organizations strive to foster inclusive, productive, and psychologically safe spaces. The first presentation by Dietl et al. starts with the lightest of the three Dark Triad traits and focuses on the dynamic nature of narcissism at work. The authors examined how daily work experiences shape fluctuations in state grandiose narcissism. The conducted study involved a daily diary design with 100 employees over a 10-day period, to test how positive and negative work experiences—specifically recognition and incivility —trigger changes in narcissistic admiration and rivalry. Findings show that recognition fosters

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incivility. This research provides critical insights into the dual nature of narcissism, revealing both its potential for positive influence when admiration is fulfilled, and its capacity for harm when rivalry is activated, demonstrating the importance of managing work environments to minimize negative outcomes. In the second paper, Roth und Klehe delve into the darker side of the Dark Triad traits, examining subclinical psychopathy and its impact on workplace behavior. The authors apply and extend the personality trait-based interactionist model to explore how psychopathy interacts with workplace climates, particularly competitive environments, to predict CWB. Using data from 121 employee–coworker dyads, the authors find that psychopathy significantly predicts CWB, with competitive work climates intensifying this relationship. Coworkers in competitive environments are also more likely to notice and be affected by these behaviors, leading to heightened burnout and stress. The study employs an Actor–Partner Interdependence Moderator Model (APIMoM) to examine how psychopathy influences not only the perpetrator's behavior but also the perceptions and well-being of coworkers. The findings highlight the need for organizational interventions that reduce competitiveness in order to diminish the harmful effects of psychopathy on both individuals and their colleagues. The third presentation by Silva et al. continues this exploration on CWB by exploring the interaction



...that traits are more prone to experience work alienation, which leads to increased engagement in CWBs. This relationship is particularly strong among individuals with high levels of neuroticism, who are more emotionally reactive to feelings of alienation. By highlighting the combined effects of these traits, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of when and how personality traits interact to exacerbate negative workplace behaviors. The findings suggest that organizations should pay close attention to both dark personality traits and emotional instability in their workforce to prevent the escalation of harmful behaviors. The fourth paper by Burns et al. explores how Dark Triad traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—shape bullying via multiple regression and fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA). Among 169 employees, psychopathy emerged as the lone predictor in regression models, explaining significant variance in bullying. Yet, fsQCA highlighted multifaceted pathways, with bullying more likely when specific trait combinations (psychopathy + Machiavellianism) were present; an absence of these traits reduced risk. This dual-method design underscores the complexity of bullying's antecedents, emphasizing the need to address multiple maladaptive traits and informing more nuanced, strategic interventions for workplace well-being. In the fifth and final paper, Gruda investigates workplace harassment as a specific type of CWB that involves unwanted, harmful (verbal, psychological or physical) actions directed at an individual or group. The author examined how Dark Triad traits at the societal level influence workplace harassment across different regions, using data from over 50,000 individuals in 38 U.S. states and 30 countries and across three studies. Results highlight the prevalence of Dark Triad traits in populations as a significant predictor of various forms of workplace harassment, including verbal abuse, physical violence, and unwanted sexual attention. Furthermore, remote work can reduce certain types of harassment in regions with high Dark Triad prevalence. This research underscores the importance of understanding the societal influences on workplace behavior and offers insights into how new working arrangements might mitigate the negative impacts of dark personality traits on organizational environments.

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Competition Sucks: Testing a Personality Trait-Based Interactionist Model of Psychopathy and CWB

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Dark Triad Dynamics and Neuroticism in Predicting Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB)

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Impact of Supervisor and Coworker Dark Triad Traits on Bullying: A Comparative and Regression Study

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Societies with a Dark Side: Population-Level Traits Predict Workplace Harassment

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