Dark Personality in the Workplace

– Introduction to a Special Issue in Applied Psychology: An International Review

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Abstract

This introduction to the Special Issue on Dark Personality in the Workplace outlines the nature of dark personality and why it is relevant in the workplace. In addition, it reviews the articles of the special in terms of both their findings and the lessons that can be drawn from them in order to enhance our understanding of dark personality in the workplace. Finally, suggestions are made concerning future directions for research on dark personality in the workplace

Keywords: Personality; Dark Personality; Organisational Behaviour

Introduction

While a recent movement towards positive psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) calls for a stronger focus on the positive aspects of life and psychology, in organisational behaviour, we often focus on the positive side already. Examples are research areas such as leadership focusing on what makes leaders effective (e.g., transformational leadership, Bass, 1985) or what makes followers work with more engagement and commitment (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1991). Indeed, in the field of organisational behaviour, an argument can be made that researchers have focused too much on positive aspects, overlooking the disastrous effects of negative behaviour in the workplace (e.g., Guenole, 2014). While this research has extensively shown the negative outcomes of such behaviour (see e.g., a recent meta-analysis on destructive leadership; Schyns & Schilling, 2013), there is still very little knowledge about the antecedents of negative organisational behaviour (e.g., Schyns & Schilling, 2013). This special issue is dedicated to closing some of the gaps in our knowledge about these negative aspects of organisational behaviour, particularly the role that dark personality plays in the workplace and in predicting negative organisational behaviour.

Defining Dark Personality

Dark personality is often defined by subclinical level of the personality characteristics of the Dark Triad, Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Indeed, probably most research into dark personality in the workplace is based on this model (Spain, Harms, & LeBreton, 2014). Another popular approach has been introduced by Hogan and Hogan (2001) and focuses on the DSM-IV Axis II disorders. In the following, I will briefly outline both approaches. However, we have to keep in mind that dark personality is broader than these two main approaches. For example, this special issue includes other aspects such as perfectionism and over-estimation. Still

others include suspiciousness (Bobko, Barealka, & Hirschfield, 2014; Kets De Vries & Miller, 1986) or – potentially – avoidant attachment style (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007).

The core elements of the Dark Triad provide a good example of the complex nature of dark personality, *Narcissism,* derived from the Narcissistic Personality disorder which comprises according to the DSM-IV (APA, 2000) criteria such as a sense of entitlement or requiring excessive admiration. Babiak and Hare (2006) put it simply but clearly: "Narcissists think that everything that happens around them, in fact, everything that others say and do, is or should be about them" (p. 40). Raskin and Terry (1988) differentiate several subdimensions of narcissism, namely, Authority, Exhibitionism, Superiority, Vanity, Exploitativeness, Entitlement, and Self-Sufficiency. Emmons (1984) found the subdimensions of Leadership/Authority, Self-Absorption/Self-Admiration, Superiority/Arrogance, and Exploitiveness/Entitlement. *Machiavellianism* according to Paulhus and Wiliams (2002) describes a manipulative personality. Jones and Paulhus (2008) describe Machiavellanists as being motivated by "cold selfishness and pure instrumentality" (p. 93). Babiak and Hare (2006) describe the *psychopath* as being "without conscience and incapable of empathy, guilt, or loyalty to anyone but themselves" (p. 19). Based on Cleckley (1941), Hare (1991), and Lykken (1995), Smith and Lilienfeld (2013) define psychopathy as " a constellation of personality traits and associated behaviors characterized by superficial charm, dishonesty, egocentricity, manipulativeness, risk-taking, and a lack of empathy and guilt masked by apparent normalcy" (p. 206). Jones and Paulhus (2010) describe psychopathy as a "personality trait characterized by callousness, impulsive thrill seeking, and criminal behavior" (p. 249). According to those authors, dark triad personality traits are distinct, yet overlap, and are characterised by indifference and dominance.

Other dark personality characteristics are often studied in isolation (e.g. perfectionism) or as part of more elaborate models. For example, the Hogan and Hogan (2001) approach consists of 11 subclinical traits, namely, excitable, sceptical, cautious, reserved, leisurely, bold, mischievous, colourful, imaginative, diligent, and dutiful. Hogan and Hogan (2001) argue that these traits might

only become noticeable after a longer exposure to the respective person but that in selection processes, they might be advantageous. This is similar to results on the dark triad (Paulhus, 1998) as I will outline in more detail later. Spain et al. (2014) summarise how the HDS dimensions are related to the dark triad: Machiavellianism is closest to sceptical, Narcissism to Bold, and Psychopathy to mischievous.

Whose personality: Leaders and followers

A considerable amount of research into negative behaviour in the organisations focuses on leadership. In leadership research, traditionally as well as in the context of destructive leadership, the focus is often on the leader (Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012) although significant progress has been made to recognise leadership as a process that includes followers and the context (e.g., Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Research into destructive forms of leadership has benefited from previous leadership research in so far that, maybe, the fact that followers are part of the process of leadership is more acknowledged (e.g., Lipman-Blumen, 2006).

There is an argument, however, for the focus on leaders or people higher up in the organisational hierarchy in the case of destructive leadership as leaders can potentially do a lot of damage due to their influence over others (McFarlin & Sweeney, 2010). They do not only have influence on others' health etc. (Kuoppala, Lamminpaa, Liira, & Vainio, 2008) but they can also be given undue influence due to followership going wrong (Kellerman, 2008). In line with this thinking, Padilla et al. (2007) differentiate different types of followers of toxic leaders or those who are susceptible to destructive leaders, namely colluders and conformers. While colluders actively contribute to destructive leadership, conformers contribute to the destructive leadership process driven by obedience. Building on this work, Thoroughgood et al. (2012) further differentiate conformers into lost souls, authoritarians, and bystanders, and colluders into acolytes and

opportunists. According to Thoroughgood et al., these types of susceptible followers are a response to different triggers.

The role of followers in the process of destructive leadership is further outlined in recent theoretical articles. For example May, Wesche, Heinitz, and Kerschreiter (2014) outline how followers' coping strategies with abusive supervisors can actually increase leaders' abusive supervision due to leaders' interpretation of followers' coping behaviour as aggressive or submissive. Pundt (2014) argued that, for example, followers' refusal to accept leader charisma can lead to abusive supervisor behaviour due to leader frustration.

Grijalva and Harms (2014) have a slightly different take on the role of followers in negative leadership processes: They suggest the Narcissistic Leaders and Dominance Complementarity Model in an attempt to show which followers can work most effectively with narcissistic leaders. While this idea also focuses on followership relating to negative or toxic leaders, it is more focus on a "should be" (as in: which are the best suited followers for those leaders) than an "as is" approach (as in: how do followers react to toxic leaders and how do they potentially contribute to or hinder the process of toxic leadership). This is also in line with Jonason, Wee, and Li (2014) who call for finding "niches" (p. 119) for individuals high in dark triad personality in order to make use of their personality in a positive way. Extending the broader scope of factors contributing to negative leadership, Grijalva and Harms (2014) point also to ethical climate of an organisation as conducive to the effect of narcissistic leader behaviour. This points to further stakeholders in the process of narcissistic leadership.

Assigning followers a more passive role in the destructive leadership process, Hansbrough and Jones (2014) specifically focus on the role of cognitive processes of narcissists in leaders on actual abusive behaviour. They argue that implicit leadership theories of narcissists reflect tyranny as something leaders can and should do, which makes them more likely to show abusive leadership reflected in those implicit leadership theories. They also argue that narcissistic leaders interpret

followers' facial expressions and their behaviour in line with their implicit followership theories (which reflect their negative view of others) and find permission to behave in an abusive manner.

Overall, the research outlined above highlights one important aspect of organisational behaviour and, that is, that while we need to investigate individual antecedents in order to be able to develop interventions for organisations, these behaviours do not happen in isolation from each other. As the example of leadership shows, toxic leaders and toxic leadership are not the same: Toxic leaders are those with dark personality traits but in order for toxic leadership to thrive, other conditions need to be met as well. Padilla et al. (2007) refer to this as the toxic triangle of leaders, followers, and context.

This recent research around destructive leadership as a process serves as a good example of two issues reflected in this special issue: Destructiveness in organisations is an interactional process between leaders, followers, and the environment (see Padilla et al., 2007). Leaders are an important part of this and, indeed, three out of eight articles in this special issue focus on leaders and their behaviour. However, the issue of dark personality is broader, as can be seen in other contributions to this special issue that focus on dark personality and negative behaviours more generally without taking into account at which level the dark personality is situated. This underlines that it is important to investigate how negative behaviour in the workplace happens by including antecedents from different stakeholders. The focus of the present special issue on dark personality is a step in this direction.

Relevance of Dark Personality

In 2006, Babiak and Hare published their book "Snakes in suits – When psychopath go to work", making the notion of a certain prevalence of "darkness" in management positions popularly known. Babiak and Hare (2006) argue that only about 1% of the general population are psychopaths but about 15% of the prison population, and about 3% in higher level positions in organisations (Babiak,

Neuman, & Hare, 2010). Psychopaths are likely to be attracted to positions of influence and thus might be slightly over-represented in leadership positions. However, as outlined above, one has to keep in mind that we are mainly talking about subclinical levels of psychopathy. Nevertheless, the potential damage done by psychopaths, particularly if they are in positions of power, is huge. Smith and Lilienfeld (2013) argue that psychopathy might be a double edged sword, with some characteristics being linked to positive outcomes such as communication skills, others to negative outcomes such as poor management skills and hard manipulation tactics. While we need more research into psychopathy in the workplace, preliminary evidence suggests that psychopathy is mainly toxic in the workplace.

Considering the subdimensions of narcissism which explicitly refer to Leadership/Authority, it might not be surprising, that recent research is particularly interested in investigating leaders' narcissism. Specifically, Deluga (1997) found that narcissistic American presidents were deemed more charismatic and their performance was rated higher than non-narcissistic presidents. Focusing leadership more generally, Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, and Fraley (in press) conducted a meta-analysis of narcissism and could demonstrate that there is a relationship between narcissism and leadership emergence but not leadership effectiveness. This is in line with considerations regarding the bright and dark side of narcissism: At first, narcissists seem confident but in the longer run, this turns into entitlement (Campbell, Hoffman, Campbell, and Marchisio, 2011). Nevertheless, O'Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, and Chatman (2014) found that narcissistic CEOs receive better compensation and their compensation is more discrepant with their members than non-narcissistic CEOs. However, as Campbell et al. (2011) highlight, the issue of narcissism in the work context is wider than just narcissistic leadership. Their review links narcissism to bad decision making (due to over-confidence and impulsivity), higher counter-productive work behaviour, inflated self-ratings, as well as lower performance where performance is linked to maintaining positive relationships.

While Machiavellianism does not seem to be related particularly to leadership emergence or leadership effectiveness , an overview of previous research by Fehr et al. (1992) highlights that Machiavellianism is related to unethical behaviour as well as persuasion, making it problematic in the workplace. However, links to other types of behaviour such as anti-social behaviours are not clear yet. Jones and Paulhus (2008) in their review confirm that Machiavellianism is related to interpersonal manipulations as well as nonaggressive behaviour such as cheating, lying and betrayal. They also seem to have a more negative view of others (Jones & Pauhlhus, 2008). Overall, the results for organisational behaviour and Machiavellianism seem more mixed and need more future research to clarify relationships than those for narcissism.

Gaps and Overview of the Special Issue

Despite the often disastrous outcomes of dark personality traits in the workplace, the focus in organisational behaviour research is often on positive personality such as the Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1992) or core self-evaluations (Bono & Judge, 2003). While it is, of course, interesting and valuable to investigate which personality traits contribute to good personal, team, and organisational functioning, negative personality traits should play a more prominent role in organisational behaviour research due to the economic and societal costs associated with them. The current special issue addresses some of the gaps in this area. In the following, I will briefly outline the contributions to this special issue before I draw conclusion about the contribution to knowledge from this special issue and how it shapes future research. Specifically, this special issue addresses gaps in research on dark personality in organisational behaviour, specifically: cultural influence, other types of dark personality beyond the dark triad, incremental validity over and above the Big Five, to name a few.

Two of the papers in the special issue focus on narcissism. Grijalva and Newman present a meta-analysis of the relationship between narcissism and counterproductive work behaviour. They

indeed confirm that narcissism is related to counterproductive work behaviour, though the relationship is lower than previously assumed (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012) and that narcissism predicts counterproductive work behaviour over and above the Big Five. In a follow-up study, they found that collectivism moderates this relationship, such that narcissism leads to less counterproductive work behaviour in collectivist countries which is likely due to social norms and that the relationship between three facets of narcissism and counterproductive work behaviour differ. This advances our knowledge on narcissism in several ways. First, the relationship between narcissism and counterproductive work behaviour is lower overall than could be expected theoretically. Second, they found two potential reasons for that. A) Narcissism consists of several facets that are differently related to counterproductive work behaviour, meaning that the overall correlations are an average of negative and positive relationships between the facets of narcissism and counterproductive work behaviour. B) Culture moderates the relationship such that in collectivistic cultures narcissism translates less into counterproductive work behaviour. For future research it is therefore important to take culture and facets into account to further our understanding of the contribution that narcissism makes to counterproductive work behaviour. Not only organisational culture but also national culture can play an important role in the link between personality and actual behaviour. Here, culture works as a norm that helps or hinders how personality traits translate into overt or covert behaviour. While we can assume that dark personality is likely prevalent in all cultures, norms might make it more or less likely that the respective behaviour associated with those traits will be shown.

Maynard, Brondolo, Connelly, and Sauer report a study on narcissism and overqualification, differentiating between objective and perceived overqualification as well as the moderating effect of overqualification on the relationship between narcissism and stress / job satisfaction. Similar to Grivalja and Newman, the authors differentiated between different facets of narcissism, namely, leadership/authority, self-absorption/self-admiration, superiority/arrogance, and

exploitiveness/entitlement. The fact that they also found differences in the assumed relationships for the different facets of narcissism underlines the importance to differentiate between those facets in future research This study sheds lights on which aspects of narcissism are particularly relevant for the perception of overqualification and how this is related to stress and job satisfaction.

A study by Brummel and Parker focuses on one aspect of narcissism, that is, entitlement as being particularly relevant in the organisational context. They compare entitlement to obligation in terms of "what is owed and what is deserved in society" (p. xx) in predicting prosocial behaviour as well as counterproductive work behaviour and organisational citizenship behaviour. They found that obligation is positively related to giving and volunteering, while entitlement is negatively related to giving but not to volunteering. Both obligation and entitlement were positively related to OCB towards individuals, though entitlement to a lower degree. Obligation was related to engagement, CWB and OCB-I, whereas entitlement was related to performance and OCB-I. However, those data were self-report, potentially blurring the relationships reported in that entitlement will come with a higher opinion of the self, including inflated ratings of performance and OCB. The study also reported geographical differences in entitlement and obligation, again emphasising the importance of taking into account culture when studying dark personality in the workplace.

Kaiser, LeBreton, and Hogan investigated the relationship between dark side traits and leader behaviour. They argue that too much or too little of some traits will foster extreme behaviours on part of the leader. Their results extend research into dark traits and CWB of leaders by focusing on different types of personality from the more common dark triad personality traits, that is the dark side of the traditional Five Factor Model. They found that emotional stability moderates the relationship between dark personality and leader behaviour. This can help us to better understand trait expression (Christiansen, Quirk, Robie, & Oswald, 2014), that is how traits are translated into behaviours.

Gaddis and Foster used the same assessment of dark personality and set them into relation to critical work behaviours of leaders. They found that traits associated with moving away from others are the most critical when it comes to negative leader behaviours. The study comprised of an impressive sample drawn from several countries. However, cross-cultural generalizability is still limited as most of their sample was drawn from Western cultures. The detailed assessments of dark traits in this study and the analysis of different behaviours, makes it possible to differentiate effects and give specific recommendations for organisations to try to prevent negative effects of dark personality leaders.

Focusing on a completely different aspect of leader dark personality, Cullen, Gentry, and Yammarino investigated the role of biased self-perceptions in terms of self-enhancement and self-diminishment in leader derailment. In a cross-cultural study, they found that in individualistic cultures leaders who over-rate themselves are more likely to be regarded as prone to derailment than in collectivistic cultures. For underrating, however, the likelihood to derail was considered lower by supervisors of leaders in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures where the perceived likelihood of derailed decreased with diminished self-ratings. This is interesting as it stresses (again) the role of culture in how dark personality is related to negative leadership behaviour (as in trait expression).

Two articles look into perfectionism, though from different perspectives. Shoss, Callison, and Witt focus on self-directed perfectionism, whereas Ozbilir, Day, and Catano investigate other-oriented perfectionism. Self-directed perfectionism can be stressful for the individual (Shoss et al.), other-oriented perfectionism can be harmful to others and is linked to a sense of entitlement (Ozbilir et al.), potentially similar to narcissistic entitlement.

Shoss et al. differentiate two forms of perfectionism, adaptive and maladaptive. Adaptive perfectionism is defined as having high standards and low discrepancy, whereas maladaptive perfectionism is characterised by high standards and high discrepancy. The authors were interested

in investigating in how far perfectionism can be not only harmful but also potentially positive in the workplace. For example, they found that high standards are correlated with high engagement and lower strain. High discrepancy, however, was related to more strain and burnout, particularly for individuals high in standards, that is, for maladaptive perfectionism.

According to Ozbilir et al. other-oriented perfectionism is maladaptive as it is characterised by unreasonable standards for other and, thus, harmful for social functioning. They examined how other-oriented perfectionism can, however, in conjunction with conscientiousness have a bright side, in the sense of contributing to helping others achieve higher standards (interpersonal citizenship behaviours, ICB). They found that for individuals high in conscientiousness there is a positive relationship between other-oriented perfectionism and ICB, although this diminished at the high end of other-oriented perfectionism. For individuals low in conscientiousness, the relationship between other-oriented perfectionism and ICB was slightly positive, though the level of ICB for those individuals was generally lower.

Conclusions and Future Research

In their call for papers, Harms and Spain (2011) outline the aim of this special issue as: “In this special issue, we seek to establish or expand what is known about the role of dark personality characteristics in the workplace. In particular, we are looking for empirical papers establishing the relative importance of dark personality characteristics beyond those typically studied by organizational researchers or that establish potential contextual conditions that may moderate the effects of such traits.” (p.696)

So, what have we learned from this special issue? The contributions to this special issue go well beyond the Dark Triad and include research on a range of other dark characteristics whose effects are not yet well-documented in the organizational literature. Within the Dark Triad, some studies showed that it is important to investigate the role of facets (here: of narcissism but the same

could be true for psychopathy, Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013; and potentially Machiavellianism) on organisational behaviour in general and leader behaviour in particular. The special issue contributions also highlighted that dark traits have incremental validity over the Big Five. Also, several contributions highlighted the role of culture as a (potential) moderator in the relationship between dark traits and toxic behaviour, such that societal norms can make it more or less likely that dark personality translates into actual behaviour. Christiansen et al. (2014) refer to trait expression to identify "when such dysfunctional behavior is likely to occur and because it is sometimes possible to alter work situations to minimize the risk of such occurrences" (p 141).

We also learned that personality traits that are generally considered to be harmful such as self-directed and other-oriented perfectionism can have a positive side to them, if they are adaptive or if they are combined with other personality traits. Harms, Spain, and Hannah (2011) found that in terms of the Hogan and Hogan (2001) dimensions of dark personality, not all 11 traits were negatively related to leader development, arguing that we need a more differentiated view on dark personality. This special issue contributes to a deeper understanding of dark personality as adaptive versus maladaptive and can support our understanding on how to deal with dark personality in a more positive way. Overall, this special issue has made an important step in furthering our knowledge on dark personality in the work place.

In terms of further research, the articles collected here provide quite a few ideas as to where the field needs further studies. Generally, more research on dark personality is needed due to its potentially strong negative influence on others and the organisation.

An important focus of future research is how to detect dark personality in selection, which can be tricky due to often covert nature of those traits. Narcissists seem often to come across as positive in the beginning but not in the longer run in terms of relationships with others (Paulhus, 1998). Paulhus, Westlake, Calvez, and Harms (2013) find a similar result for self-presentation, especially in a Western context,which is similar to what Babiak and Hare (2006) report about psychopaths. That

means that some dark personality traits might be difficult to detect in job interviews and indeed, narcissism seems to be related to emergence as leaders (Grijalva et al., in press). This points in the direction that in the short-term, some dark personality traits are conducive for performance (at least to achieve promotion). The lack of relationship between narcissism and leader performance (Grijalva et al., in press), as well as considerations about longer term effects of psychopaths (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013), however, indicate also, that this effect wears off and that selecting employees high in dark personality traits, particularly for influential positions, is at the very least not very wise.

Sutton argues that there are some positive effects that dark personality can achieve (see also Henning, Wygant, & Barnes, 2014) and, indeed, some contributions in this special issue do indeed look at the bright side of dark personality (Shoss et al. and Ozbilir et al.). However, we need to keep in mind that there is a difference between dark personality leading to dark behaviour and the strategic use of dark *behaviour* to achieve goals. The latter can be potentially useful, while the former might be difficult to control due to the selfish nature of those dark personality traits. However, as some contributions outline, dark personality traits can potentially be adaptive to some contexts. More research is needed to understand the link between dark personality and behaviour as well as the conditions under which dark personality can be adaptive.

Another line of thought that considers adaptive versus maladaptive behaviour is outlined in Dilchert, Ones, and Krueger (2014) who argue that maladaptive traits are the roots of maladaptive behaviour but the latter does not need to be problematic in the work place if the behaviour is only focused on the person him-/herself rather than counter-productive. More research is needed to find conditions under which dark personality is harmful “only” to the individual possessing those traits or also to others around them and potentially to the organisation as a whole.

An important gap in the research around dark personality is the interplay between personality of different stakeholders and the national or organisational environment that can potentially nourish toxicity, or the behavioural expression of those traits. Therefore, we need more research to

understand under which conditions dark personality does and does not translate into toxic behaviours. In this special issue, culture has been pointed out as one potential moderator. Other that need further examination might be ingroup status (in the sense that dark personality might only translate into toxic behaviours towards the outgroup) or type of profession (in the sense that dark personality in some contexts can be expressed in less toxic behaviours).

In this special issue, different assessment strategies have been used to investigate dark personality. Having validated tools available to screen for dark personality is vital in theory and practice. Generally, assessing negative traits can be complex due to social desirability of self- but also other reports or fear of retaliation for other reports.

Overall, we have learned a lot from this special issue but there is still a lot of work to be done to avoid the development of a toxic workplace (Kusy & Holloway, 2009).

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