



## Competition, autonomy, and prestige: Mechanisms through which the Dark Triad predict job satisfaction <sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Organizational researchers increasingly recognize the need to consider the Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism) when explaining undesirable work outcomes (e.g., counterproductive behaviors). However, little research has focused on the motivations of those who actually hold the traits. In this study ( $N = 361$ ) we examined how the Dark Triad traits predispose individuals to perceive situations as competitive, prestigious, and comprised of restrictions (i.e., autonomy) which differentially predict job satisfaction. Individuals high on psychopathy and Machiavellianism perceived their workplaces as competitive, whereas individuals high on narcissism perceived their workplaces as prestigious and with fewer restrictions. Sex differences in perceptions were fully mediated by psychopathy and Machiavellianism. We discuss our results from an Evolutionary Industrial/Organization Psychology framework.

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### 1. Introduction

In parallel with the public exposure of Enron, Lehman Brothers, Worldcom, Freddie Mac, Bernie Madoff, and a host of other multi-billion dollar fraud cases, attention has recently been drawn to the role of the Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) in Industrial/Organizational (I/O) Psychology (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniels, 2012; Spain, Harms, & Leberton, 2014). These traits are characterized by entitlement, superiority, dominance (i.e., narcissism), glib social charm, manipulateness (i.e., Machiavellianism), callous social attitudes, impulsivity, and interpersonal antagonism (i.e., psychopathy), and numerous research studies have accentuated their deleterious role in the workplace (Boddy, 2010; Galperin, Bennett, & Aquino, 2010; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). However, research on the Dark Triad traits has generally examined the negative consequences of such traits in the workplace—how “bad apples” spoil the bushel for everyone else—this focus may have led to an imbalance in our knowledge about the Dark Triad traits in various domains including the workplace (Judge & LePine,

2007, chap. 20). That is, we know virtually nothing about the specific tendencies and dispositions linked to the Dark Triad traits that may motivate and allow such individuals to operate in the workplace (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014).

This study examines the Dark Triad traits from the latter perspective by examining the functional value of these traits in individuals. Specifically, this study focused on how perceptions of work environments are associated with the Dark Triad traits. We examined the congruence hypothesis that people who better fit the work environment will be more satisfied with the job (Kristof, 1996). This study contributes to the literature in at least two ways. First, by focusing on the potential positive outcomes of Dark Triad traits, we extend the little research in this area (Judge & LePine, 2007). Second, in contrast to the largely descriptive work that currently dominates research on the Dark Triad traits; we articulate a view of the Dark Triad traits as evolved psychological mechanisms that may be beneficial in some circumstances (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2014).

From an evolutionary perspective (Buss, 1995), traits that help an individual survive and reproduce tend to confer more benefits than costs. These traits tend to motivate individuals to seek acceptance, approval, and popularity (i.e., to get along) and also to seek power, status, and control (i.e., to get ahead; Hogan, 1983). But getting along and getting ahead can be incompatible goals. While most people seek an acceptable balance between these goals, those high on the Dark Triad traits enact a strategy where they eschew

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the former for the latter (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012; Jonason & Webster, 2012).

The Dark Triad traits may facilitate the effective and unremorseful exploitation of others for personal gain (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). Such a strategy may cost individuals through ostracism or retaliation. However, the unique combination of traits may allow such individuals to operate undetected or otherwise unchallenged – for instance, glib social charm and cunning may allow such individuals to be particular adept at deceiving others and avoiding blame (Jonason, Slomski, et al., 2012; Jonason & Webster, 2012). Thus, potential costs may be minimized at times and may be sufficiently low or irregular to allow an exploitative strategy to be adaptive for some individuals (Buss, 1995).

Underlying much of applied psychology is the presumption that job satisfaction results from a correspondence between the needs of an individual and what is supplied by the workplace (Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 2001). When personality characteristics are taken to exemplify individual's needs, and work climate is taken to exemplify organizational supplies (Kristof, 1996), fit would, by definition, imply a more satisfied individual (Edwards & Shipp, 2007). Because individuals high on the Dark Triad traits seek power, control, and status, and generally shun acceptance, approval, and popularity, as a first step toward directly assessing the functional value of the Dark Triad traits in the workplace, we test the overall hypothesis that individuals high on one or more of the Dark Triad traits would tend to be more satisfied in those environments that they perceive supply them with opportunities to gain power, status, and control. Thus, in this study, we measured perceptions of the work climate (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998; Hackman & Oldman, 1976) related to power (i.e., competition), control (i.e., restrictions placed on them), and status (i.e., prestige), and examined if individuals high on the Dark Triad traits were more satisfied in such environments. Then we examine whether these perceptions predict job satisfaction.

Personality traits may systematically color the way individuals perceive their world, including their workplace. The Dark Triad traits should, therefore, be associated with unique patterns of workplace perceptions. First, narcissists are driven by the needs to feel in control and prestigious (Raskin & Terry, 1988) but in most workplace environments they are likely to not fully satisfy these desires. These individuals may facultatively deceive themselves in order to go work, thereby viewing their work as disproportionately low on restrictions and high in prestige. Second, psychopathy may align individuals with jobs that lack much prestige; it appears correlated with preferences for more hands-on and practical jobs (Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson, 2014). This may relate to a tendency to more-or-less accurately perceive their jobs as low in prestige. Third, psychopathy and Machiavellianism may orient individuals to perceive their world as competitive (through disagreeableness; Sibley & Duckitt, 2010). In psychopathy, this may be a function of its characteristic aggressiveness (Jonason & Webster, 2010). In Machiavellianism, this may be a function of its approach-orientation to power (Christie & Geis, 1970). Both may translate into associations between the traits and people's ratings of their workplace as competitive. Fourth, personality traits may create biases in perceptions which then translate into job outcomes like satisfaction and the frequency of which one considers quitting one's job (Edwards et al., 2001; Kristof, 1996). Therefore, we test a Structural Equation Model where the Dark Triad traits predict workplace perceptions which then predict job satisfaction/thoughts of quitting. In addition to the above, we expect job satisfaction/thoughts of quitting to be related to perceptions of (1) limited restrictions, (2) job prestige, and (3) limited competitiveness (Hackman & Oldman, 1976).

Not only should personality traits be correlated with particular perceptions of one's workplace, men and women may also differ on at least one perceptual factor: workplace competitiveness. Evolutionary accounts of sex differences highlight that men can benefit more from competition than women can (Wilson & Daly, 1985), something seen in sex differences in the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013). That is, because women (and all mammalian females) bear the majority of the cost of reproduction (i.e., gestation, nursing, and rearing), they tend to be reproductively more valuable sex and have a lower ceiling on the number of offspring they can have (Geary, 2010). In contrast, members of the less valuable sex (men, or more generally, male mammals) have a much higher reproductive ceiling (limited only by the number of viable female sexual partners) and stand to gain more from risk-taking, and have evolved to be intrasexually competitive in order to obtain access to the more valuable sex (Geary, 2010; Wilson & Daly, 1985). Therefore, it seems reasonable that men's greater perceptions of competitiveness in the workplace may in part be related to their greater alignment with the Dark Triad traits, which enable an especially competitive mindset centered around achieving status. Therefore, we test a mediation model whereby sex differences in perceptions of one's workplace as competitive were a function of individual differences in the Dark Triad traits.

Researchers have repeatedly highlighted the undesirable nature of the Dark Triad traits in the workplace (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Spain et al., 2014). This is implicitly motivated by company's interests (i.e., the "bottom" line). However, this tendency to focus on group-level outcomes may be in error and creates an imbalance in what we understand about these traits (Jonason, Wee, Li, 2014; Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson, 2014). Personality traits—especially the Dark Triad traits—may serve individuals more than they serve groups (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012). Where personality traits align with group outcomes, that is all well and good, but this should not be taken as evidence that focusing on group-level outcomes is best for understanding personality traits. Understanding how personality traits function in individual's lives is an important area to examine for even the most socially undesirable personality traits. In this study, we provide unique evidence to understand the way the Dark Triad traits are linked to three perceptions of workplace climate and how those perceptions may be associated with job satisfaction.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample was composed of 361 employed Americans (56% male), aged 23–67 years old ( $M = 33.70$ ,  $SD = 9.82$ ) with an average tenure at their job of 58.63 months ( $SD = 59.33$ ,  $Range = 1–518$ ) who were paid US\$1 for their completion of a series of measures advertised on MTurk. The average participant was employed full time (70%), making between US\$25,000–\$49,999/year (38%), and were ranked as an employee (70%).<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2. Measures

The Dark Triad traits were measured with the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The measure is composed of 27 items measuring Machiavellianism (e.g., "It's not wise to tell your secrets."), psychopathy (e.g., "Payback needs to be quick and nasty."), and narcissism (e.g., "People see me as a natural leader.") where participants report their agreement with each statement

<sup>1</sup> Data from Jonason, Wee, Li, Jackson (2014) was trimmed to remove missing data in the work-related variables in this study.

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