Angel on one shoulder: Can perceived organizational support moderate the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and counterproductive work behavior?

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A B S T R A C T
Drawing on social exchange theory and a person-situation framework, we examined perceived organizational support as a moderator of the relationship between the Dark Triad personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy with specific types of counterproductive work behavior (i.e., sabotage, production deviance, withdrawal, theft, and abuse). Using a sample of 208 currently-employed online participants and structural equation modeling analyses we found that individuals scoring high on the Dark Triad traits reported engaging in some types of counterproductive work behavior less frequently when they perceived higher levels of organizational support. Our results support the person-situation interactionist model and suggest that individuals possessing higher levels of narcissism and psychopathy engage in certain types of counterproductive work behavior relatively less frequently when they perceive the organization as being supportive.

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1. Introduction

Dark Triad research has attracted scholars to examine the effect of “dark side” personality traits in the organizational sciences, but this research is still in its youth (O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). The Dark Triad consists of subclinical levels of three intercorrelated yet conceptually separate personality constructs including narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissism includes characteristics such as entitlement and perceived superiority (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Psychopathy includes a lack of empathy and impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Machiavellianism includes the use of manipulative and deceitful behaviors intended to undermine others (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012).

Prior research has shown that individuals scoring high on narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy tend to employ aggressive influence tactics (Jonason et al., 2012) and score low on agreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). They also tend to engage in more counterproductive work behavior (CWB; O’Boyle et al., 2012). CWB includes deliberate actions targeting the organization or people such as sabotage, production deviance, withdrawal, theft, and abuse (Spector et al., 2006).

Individuals scoring high on narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy may see deviant acts as an outlet for releasing their aggression or obtaining revenge. They may also see counterproductive work behaviors as a way to assert their dominance in a social context and obtain resources.

1.1. Perceived organizational support as a moderator

Although narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are positively related to CWB, there has been a call for examining the role of contextual factors in strengthening or weakening this relationship (O’Boyle et al., 2012). Because employees operate within an organizational context, it is imperative to examine the effects of an individual’s perception of organizational factors on the relationship between Dark Triad traits and CWB. For example, it is more adaptive for individuals to display their Dark Triad traits in certain organizational contexts (e.g., short-term jobs involving risk) relative to others (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2014). Similarly, individuals scoring high on the Dark Triad report greater satisfaction in jobs providing autonomy and prestige but not too much competition (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2015). Thus, in the current study, we sought to build on prior findings by examining the role of perceived organizational support (POS) on the Dark Triad-workplace outcome relationship.

POS refers to an employees’ perception that their organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). A high level of POS is associated...
with reduced employee absenteeism (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Eisenberger et al., 1986) and withdrawal behaviors (Eder & Eisenberger, 2008). Because POS could enhance positive organizational outcomes and reduce some types of CWB, we selected POS as the focal contextual variable in examining whether it could reduce the impact of Dark Triad traits on specific types of CWB. Specifically, we drew upon social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and person-situation interactionism (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) to theorize how POS may inhibit the frequency with which narcissistic, Machiavellian, and psychopathic employees engage in various types of CWB. In addition, advancing the literature on this topic may also benefit managers and companies by reducing the negative outcomes associated with employee narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy.

We based our hypotheses about the moderating effects of POS on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and person-situation interactionism (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). According to social exchange theory, employees select behaviors by weighing the costs and benefits they expect to receive (Blau, 1964). Perhaps individuals high in narcissism (i.e., self-aggrandizing), Machiavellianism (i.e., manipulative), and psychopathy (i.e., lacking empathy) engage in CWB because they share a common “core of darkness” including callous affect and manipulation (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Prior work has shown that narcissists respond more aggressively to ego-threat, whereas psychopaths respond more aggressively when provoked or unprovoked (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). We propose that high POS may enhance the narcissist’s sense of self-importance and reduce ego-threat. We also propose that POS will likely reduce the element of provocation that prime psychopathic employees and having more favorable perceptions of the organization will likely reduce unprovoked CWB. Likewise, we reason that Machiavellians with high POS will view their organizations as less threatening and opt to manipulate behind the scenes instead of using risky overt tactics (i.e., CWB). Thus, perceiving the organization in a more positive way may inhibit the natural tendencies of an employee who is characterized by the Dark Triad traits and result in reduced CWB relative to other trait-equivalent employees with lower POS. Alternatively, individuals with Dark Triad traits who have high POS scores may perceive a strategic advantage in maintaining good standing by engaging in fewer CWBs, thereby allowing them to strengthen their vantage point and consolidate future opportunities to exploit the organization.

The person-situation interactionist model (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) also provides support for the dynamic interaction between Dark Triad traits, POS, and CWB. Specifically, the conditions within which behavior will be attenuated or inhibited, and the strength of such situational constraints, can affect the propensity for trait expression (i.e., trait activation theory; Tett & Burnett, 2003). Hence, contextual variables such as POS may create a buffer that reduces the frequency with which employees high in narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy may engage in CWB.

Consistent with this interactionist logic, negative perceptions of POS are more strongly related to deviance for individuals’ low in agreeableness. Thus, negative perceptions of organizational support enhance deviant behaviors among disagreeable individuals, whereas agreeable individuals are likely to avoid deviant behaviors regardless of POS (Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004). Similarly, POS weakens the strength of the positive relationship between aggregated work group withdrawal behaviors and individual withdrawal behaviors (Eder & Eisenberger, 2008). Based on these findings, and drawing upon social exchange theory and the person-situation interactionist model, we predicted that POS would moderate the Dark Triad-CWB relationships such that the usual tendency for individuals with higher levels of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy to engage in greater CWB would be reduced when those individuals perceived higher levels of organizational support.

Hypothesis 1. POS will moderate the relationship between narcissism and CWB, such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is low and weaker when POS is high.

Hypothesis 2. POS will moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and CWB, such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is low and weaker when POS is high.

Hypothesis 3. POS will moderate the relationship between psychopathy and CWB, such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is low and weaker when POS is high.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Cross-sectional data were collected from 208 employees in return for compensation (i.e., 65 cents per participant in U.S. dollars) via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants had a median age range of 30–34 years, with responses ranging from 20 to 24 (i.e., 10.6%) and 60–65 (i.e., 2.4%), and 50.5% were female. About 73.1% of the sample reported working at least 40 h per week ranging from 20 to 24 h per week (i.e., 2.5%) to 50+ h per week (i.e., 4.3%). Job tenure ranged from 1 year to 25 years with a median of 4.5 years. Participants reported a median annual salary of $21,000–$40,000, ranging from $0–$20,000 (i.e., 16.8%) to $101,000+ (i.e., 4.8%) in U.S. dollars. The most frequently reported fields of employment were retail (i.e., 15.4%), finance and insurance (i.e., 12.0%), and information (i.e., 9.1%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Dark Triad

Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy were measured using the 27-item Short Dark Triad scale (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include “I insist on getting the respect I deserve” (i.e., narcissism), “Most people can be manipulated” (i.e., Machiavellianism), and “People who mess with me always regret it” (i.e., psychopathy). The narcissism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.77$), Machiavellianism ($\alpha = 0.78$), and psychopathy ($\alpha = 0.80$) scales each displayed adequate internal consistency in our study.

2.2.2. Counterproductive work behavior

CWB was measured using the 33-item version of the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (Spector et al., 2006). Responses were indicated on a five-point frequency scale (1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = Once or twice per month, 4 = Once or twice per week, 5 = Every day). Sample items include “hit or pushed someone at work” (i.e., abuse), “poorly did your work incorrectly” (i.e., production deviance), “purposely damaged a piece of equipment or property” (i.e., sabotage), “stole something belonging to someone at work” (i.e., theft), and “left work earlier than you were allowed to” (i.e., withdrawal). The five subscales included the 3-item sabotage ($\alpha = 0.76$), 4-item withdrawal ($\alpha = 0.80$), 3-item production deviance ($\alpha = 0.66$), 5-item theft ($\alpha = 0.82$), and 17-item abuse ($\alpha = 0.91$) subscales.

2.2.3. Perceived organizational support

In line with prior work POS was measured using the eight highest loading items from the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger et al., 1986) with a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item is “The organization takes pride in my accomplishments at work” ($\alpha = 0.90$).
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