

# WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF PSYCHOPATHIC TRAITS IN A SUPERVISOR ON EMPLOYEES' PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS?

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## ABSTRACT

*Psychopathy, a construct with roots in forensic psychology, has recently been applied to the corporate context (Babiak, & Hare, 2006; Babiak, 2007). The goal of this study is to determine whether there is a relationship between supervisor's score on a measure of psychopathy and employees' psychological distress. One hundred and sixteen employees from a branch of a large Canadian financial institution have scored their supervisor on a psychopathy measure (B-Scan-360 psychopathy subscale; Babiak, & Hare, in press) and have completed a self-measure of psychological distress (General Health questionnaire-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1991). Results from regression analyses indicate that supervisor psychopathy predicts employees' psychological distress. The present results highlight the importance of screening for problematic personalities such as psychopathy for selection and promotion.*

## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, organizations are becoming more and more concerned about the “epidemic” state of mental health problems in the workplace. The World Health Organization has stated that depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide (World Health Organization, 2000). They also predict that, by the year 2020, depression will reach second place in the “global burden of disease” ranking. This means tremendous costs both for the individuals and for working organizations internationally. Prevention of the problem is difficult since researchers are still at the early stage of understanding the factors underlying psychological distress in the workplace. The identification of which factors cause an employee to experience psychological distress will certainly involve personal (stress management, personality, family) and organizational variables (workload, working hours). One factor, managerial behaviour, has yet to be studied extensively, but the few studies that have examined this element are unanimous: Poor management behaviour can lead to psychological distress in employees. Hogan & Hogan (2001) report that one of the reasons for studying managerial incompetence is that “bad managers make life miserable for

those who must work for them, and there is virtually nothing subordinates can do to defend themselves, except to suffer in silence.”

Organizations often search for employees who are charismatic, confident, have the ability to make difficult decisions, and the capacity to present an ostentatious vision of the future (Babiak, Neumann & Hare, 2010). Although, at face value, these abilities may correspond well with attractive traits assumed to be required by managers and leaders of organizations, these abilities are also descriptive of problematic personality features (Babiak, & Hare, 2006). Arguably the most dangerous of these problematic workplace personalities is psychopathy (Hare, 1999), a construct with roots in forensic psychology that has recently been applied to the corporate context (Babiak, 2007). Psychopathic employees can have a negative effect on other employees, as well on the organization itself, making it important to have an assessment instrument that will assist in employee selection and promotion (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Babiak and Hare (in Press) have built a 360 measure of corporate behavior that includes a subscale measuring psychopathic traits.

## **Objectives**

The objective of this paper is to present results of the relations between scores on the B-Scan Supervisor (Babiak, & Hare, in Press) and self-ratings of employee psychological distress (General Health questionnaire-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1991). To our knowledge, this is the first study to measure the impact of psychopathic traits in supervisors on employees' psychological distress.

## **METHOD**

After the purpose and voluntary confidential nature of the project had been described (i.e., to measure the impact of different types of personalities on workplace behavior / mental health), 136 employees and managers of large financial institution in Quebec were invited to complete a number of self-report questionnaires regarding personality and an array of industrial-organizational variables. Of these, 116 agreed to participate (response rate of 85.3%). They completed an on-line survey through Survey Monkey. The survey was conducted during work hours, and took approximately 45 minutes to complete. The employees filled-out an evaluation of the psychopathic traits of their immediate supervisors with the use of the B-Scan-360 (Babiak & Hare, in press), a measure of corporate psychopathy, in addition to a self-report measure of psychological distress in addition to a self-report measure of their own psychological well-being (General Health Questionnaire-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1991).

## MEASURES

*Supervisor psychopathy measure:* The B-Scan is a new 360 degree measure of corporate behaviour. It presents a subscale measuring psychopathy in the workplace (Babiak, & Hare, in press) based on the Hare Four-Factor Psychopathy Model, derived from the PCL-R (Hare, 2--3), the instrument referred to as the “state of the art” (Fulero, 1995) and the “gold standard” (Acheson, 2005) for the assessment of psychopathy. The B-Scan 360 has been validated by the authors (for information on the validation of this instrument, please contact the first author). The psychopathy subscale consists of 20 items which asks respondents to rate how descriptive each item is of their immediate supervisor (i.e., disagree strongly to agree strongly). Examples of items include the following: “is insincere”, “seems to enjoy being disruptive at times”, “can make a joke out of anyone”. A factor analysis has identified four factors each including 5 items. These factors are: Factor 1 =Manipulative/Unethical ( $\alpha = .78$ ); Factor 2 = Callous/Insensitive ( $\alpha = .81$ ); Factor 3 = Unreliable/Unfocused ( $\alpha = .75$ ); and Factor 4 = Intimidating/Aggressive ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

*Employees’ psychological distress:* Measured by 12 items related to psychological well-being from the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1991). The GHQ-12 has been found to have great validity coefficients for individuals in the workforce (Makowska, Merez, Mościcka, Kolasa, 2002). The items include: “I think of myself as worthless,” “I have been unable to concentrate,” and are rated on a 4 point Likert-type scale ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

## RESULTS

Results indicate that employees’ psychological distress was positively correlated with the B-Scan Supervisor total score ( $r = .30, p < .01$ ) and with the score on Factor 1 (Manipulative/Unethical) ( $r = .20, p < .05$ ), Factor 2 (Callous/Insensitive) ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ), and Factor 4 (Intimidating/Aggressive) ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ). Regression analyses demonstrate that B-Scan-Supervisor total score significantly predicts employees’ psychological distress ( $R^2=.34, \beta = .26 p < .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Babiak and al. (2010) report that the profile of an “ideal leader” is a concept hard to define and executives tend to rely on their “gut feeling” to judge this complex attribute. More importantly, these authors continue on stating that “unfortunately, once decision makers believe that an individual has future ‘leader potential’, even bad performance reviews or evaluations from subordinates and peers do not seem to be able to shake their belief.” (Babiak and al., 2010).

The present results highlight the importance of screening for problematic personalities such as psychopathy for selection and promotion. The present findings also stress the importance of focusing not only on some of the abilities organizations are looking for when hiring or promoting a manager but on the behaviors they wish to avoid in order to prevent affecting employees' psychological well-being.

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