The Dark Triad at work: How toxic employees get their way

Peter K. Jonason a,⁎, Sarah Slomski b, Jamie Partyka b

a School of Psychology, University of Western Sydney, Milperra NSW 2214, Australia
b Department of Psychology, University of West Florida, 11000 University PKWY, Pensacola, FL 32504, USA

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 20 June 2011
Received in revised form 1 November 2011
Accepted 7 November 2011
Available online 1 December 2011

Keywords:
Manipulation tactics
Dark Triad
Narcissism
Psychopathy
Machiavellianism
Workplace

A B S T R A C T

Toxic employees have come under serious investigation lately. In this study (N = 419) we examined the role the Dark Triad traits, as measures of being a toxic employee, play in predicting tactics of workplace manipulation and how the Dark Triad might mediate sex differences in the adoption of hard (e.g., threats) and soft tactics (e.g., offering compliments). Psychopathy and Machiavellianism were correlated with adopting hard tactics whereas Machiavellianism and narcissism were correlated with adopting soft tactics. The Dark Triad composite fully mediated the sex differences in the adoption of hard tactics but not soft tactics. The Dark Triad may facilitate the adoption of numerous tactics of influence independently but collectively may lead men more than women to adopt an aggressive or forceful style of interpersonal influence at the workplace.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing body of research on destructive, abusive, or toxic employees. In particular, research has focused on how traits like narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism – the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) – adversely affect numerous workplace outcomes (Brunell et al., 2008; Penney & Spector, 2002; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998). Narcissism has been linked to unethical behavior in CEOs (Amerinic & Craig, 2010; Galperin, Bennett, & Aquino, 2010) and a need for power (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Corporate psychopaths have diminished levels of corporate responsibility and can adversely affect productivity (Boddy, 2010). Machiavellianism is associated with diminished organizational, supervisor, and team commitment (Zettler, Friedrich, & Hilbig, 2011), along with a tendency to be perceived as abusive by subordinates (Kiazad, Restubog, Zagenczyk, Kiewitz, & Tang, 2010) and to focus on maintaining power and using manipulative behaviors (Kessler et al., 2010). However, most of the work has examined the three traits separately but the three traits are moderately intercorrelated (Jacobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Therefore, a study that assesses all three of these simultaneously is warranted because it presents the opportunity to control for shared variability, therefore, isolating associations to a particular personality trait. We also attempt to account for sex differences in the adoption of two styles of workplace influence by using mediation analyses.

Even with these undesirable characteristics, the fact that these people get hired should be of no surprise. They embody many desirable traits like charm, leadership, assertiveness, and impression management skills (Ames, 2009; Paunonen, Lonkvist, Verkasalo, Leikas, & Nissinen, 2006). Interviews occur over a short period which may not permit sufficient time for the darker sides of these individuals to be revealed (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011). Even more surprising is that these individuals are not detected and then summarily dismissed (Boddy, Ladyshewsky, & Galvin, 2010). Despite numerous studies on workplace manipulation (Anderson, Spataro, & Flynn, 2008; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Lamudre & Scudder, 1995; Levine, 2010; Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990; Yukl & Tracey, 1992), we know little about how those high on the Dark Triad traits (i.e., toxic employees) might get their way in organizations. Through “influence”, “manipulation”, “force”, or “pushing” individuals can induce change in behavior, opinions, attitudes, needs, and values (Ames, 2009; French & Raven, 1959). We examine how individuals’ scores on the Dark Triad traits are correlated with tendencies to use a variety of manipulation tactics at work.

Individuals may employ soft (e.g., ingratiating and reason) or hard (e.g., assertiveness and direct manipulations) tactics in pursuit of their goals (Farmer, Maslyn, Fedor, & Goodman, 1997). The primary distinction between these two types of tactics of influence lies in their forcefulness. Hard tactics are essentially tactics where the user forces their will on another person. One might describe one who uses hard tactics as “pushy”. In contrast, soft tactics are designed to convince the target that it is in their best interest to engage in the advocated behavior. Each tactic surely has its place in
the workplace. For instance, in negotiations, hard tactics might be particularly useful in getting something done by a certain date, say a construction project. Soft tactics may permit a subtler form of influence whereby the target actually changes their mind through the use of reason to, say, adopt a paperless workplace.

Because of the shared exploitive nature of the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), we expect the Dark Triad traits to be correlated with the adoption of both soft and hard tactics but more so with hard than soft tactics. In addition, given that the aggressiveness of the Dark Triad might be localized to psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Warren & Clarbour, 2009), we expect it to be correlated with hard tactics and not soft tactics when we control for shared variability among the Dark Triad traits. Those high on the Dark Triad may also forge alliances to offset their work to others. For instance, ingrati- ation, exchange of favors, and joking may create workplace friendships. These friendships could be later exploited to offset work obligations. Because the target thinks there is a friendship, they are less likely to detect the exploitation, thinking they are doing a favor for a friend. Narcissism is less well correlated with aggressiveness than psychopathy and Machiavellianism are (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Therefore, narcissism may only be linked to the use of soft tactics, when we control for shared variability and, in particular, with the use of their appearance given the interest narcissists have in physical appearance (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Last, the nature of Machiavellianism is a tendency to manipulate others (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009) and to be charming (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Therefore, it should be correlated with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for the shared variance among them (see Table 1, coefficients in brackets). The use of hard tactics was associated with high scores on narcissism and Machiavellianism (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Because of the shared exploitive nature of the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), we expect the Dark Triad traits to be correlated with the adoption of both soft and hard tactics but more so with hard than soft tactics. In addition, given that the aggressiveness of the Dark Triad might be localized to psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Warren & Clarbour, 2009), we expect it to be correlated with hard tactics and not soft tactics when we control for shared variability among the Dark Triad traits. Those high on the Dark Triad may also forge alliances to offset their work to others. For instance, ingrati- ation, exchange of favors, and joking may create workplace friendships. These friendships could be later exploited to offset work obligations. Because the target thinks there is a friendship, they are less likely to detect the exploitation, thinking they are doing a favor for a friend. Narcissism is less well correlated with aggressiveness than psychopathy and Machiavellianism are (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Therefore, narcissism may only be linked to the use of soft tactics, when we control for shared variability and, in particular, with the use of their appearance given the interest narcissists have in physical appearance (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Last, the nature of Machiavellianism is a tendency to manipulate others (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009) and to be charming (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Therefore, it should be correlated with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for the shared variance among them (see Table 1, coefficients in brackets). The use of hard tactics was associated with high scores on narcissism and Machiavellianism (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Because of the shared exploitive nature of the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), we expect the Dark Triad traits to be correlated with the adoption of both soft and hard tactics but more so with hard than soft tactics. In addition, given that the aggressiveness of the Dark Triad might be localized to psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Warren & Clarbour, 2009), we expect it to be correlated with hard tactics and not soft tactics when we control for shared variability among the Dark Triad traits. Those high on the Dark Triad may also forge alliances to offset their work to others. For instance, ingrati- ation, exchange of favors, and joking may create workplace friendships. These friendships could be later exploited to offset work obligations. Because the target thinks there is a friendship, they are less likely to detect the exploitation, thinking they are doing a favor for a friend. Narcissism is less well correlated with aggressiveness than psychopathy and Machiavellianism are (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Therefore, narcissism may only be linked to the use of soft tactics, when we control for shared variability and, in particular, with the use of their appearance given the interest narcissists have in physical appearance (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Last, the nature of Machiavellianism is a tendency to manipulate others (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009) and to be charming (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Therefore, it should be correlated with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for the shared variance among them (see Table 1, coefficients in brackets). The use of hard tactics was associated with high scores on narcissism and Machiavellianism (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Because of the shared exploitive nature of the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), we expect the Dark Triad traits to be correlated with the adoption of both soft and hard tactics but more so with hard than soft tactics. In addition, given that the aggressiveness of the Dark Triad might be localized to psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Warren & Clarbour, 2009), we expect it to be correlated with hard tactics and not soft tactics when we control for shared variability among the Dark Triad traits. Those high on the Dark Triad may also forge alliances to offset their work to others. For instance, ingrati- ation, exchange of favors, and joking may create workplace friendships. These friendships could be later exploited to offset work obligations. Because the target thinks there is a friendship, they are less likely to detect the exploitation, thinking they are doing a favor for a friend. Narcissism is less well correlated with aggressiveness than psychopathy and Machiavellianism are (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Therefore, narcissism may only be linked to the use of soft tactics, when we control for shared variability and, in particular, with the use of their appearance given the interest narcissists have in physical appearance (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Last, the nature of Machiavellianism is a tendency to manipulate others (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009) and to be charming (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Therefore, it should be correlated with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for the shared variance among them (see Table 1, coefficients in brackets). The use of hard tactics was associated with high scores on narcissism and Machiavellianism (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Because of the shared exploitive nature of the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), we expect the Dark Triad traits to be correlated with the adoption of both soft and hard tactics but more so with hard than soft tactics. In addition, given that the aggressiveness of the Dark Triad might be localized to psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Warren & Clarbour, 2009), we expect it to be correlated with hard tactics and not soft tactics when we control for shared variability among the Dark Triad traits. Those high on the Dark Triad may also forge alliances to offset their work to others. For instance, ingrati- ation, exchange of favors, and joking may create workplace friendships. These friendships could be later exploited to offset work obligations. Because the target thinks there is a friendship, they are less likely to detect the exploitation, thinking they are doing a favor for a friend. Narcissism is less well correlated with aggressiveness than psychopathy and Machiavellianism are (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Therefore, narcissism may only be linked to the use of soft tactics, when we control for shared variability and, in particular, with the use of their appearance given the interest narcissists have in physical appearance (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Last, the nature of Machiavellianism is a tendency to manipulate others (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009) and to be charming (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Therefore, it should be correlated with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation. In contrast, given the self-serving, hypnotizing, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate with the use of both hard and soft tactics when we control for shared variability and in particular with “charming tactics” (e.g., joking/kidding, offering compliments) and a tendency to manipulate the person and the situation.
Given what we have observed so far, we further analyzed the data by testing for moderation by the sex of the participant and then we tested for mediation effects. We used the Dark Triad composite to minimize Type I error, because prior work has successfully used the composite to test for moderation and mediation (Jonason et al., 2009). When we assessed moderation by the sex of the participant across each tactic and both tactical-styles (i.e., hard and soft), we only found one case of moderation by the sex of the participant. Scores on the Dark Triad composite were correlated with the use of assertiveness ($z = 2.23, p < .05$) in men ($r = .35, p < .01$) but not in women ($r = .08$).

There are three stipulations one needs to meet in order to test for mediation (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). In Table 2, sex differences were revealed for the use of hard tactics and the Dark Triad composite. In Table 1, the Dark Triad composite was correlated with the adoption of hard tactics. The sex difference in the use of hard tactics was fully mediated by the Dark Triad composite (Sobel’s $z = 14.59, p < .01$). As can be seen in Table 3, while there is a significant sex difference in the use of the hard tactics (Step 1), this sex difference is fully mediated by the participant’s scores on the Dark Triad composite (Step 2). Significant mediation was not found for the use of soft tactics although the prerequisites for mediation analysis were met.

We utilized two different samples. Our volunteer sample was significantly older than our student sample ($t(396) = 2.69, p < .01$) and, thus, we did some follow-up analyses using just the hard and soft tactics along with the Dark Triad composite to be sure our analyses were not unduly biased by this fact. First, when we compared the correlations between the Dark Triad composite and the use of hard and soft tactics, there were no significant differences. Second, we partialed the age variance associated with participants’ age and all our correlations remained significant ($p < .05$, $p < .01$). Third, the volunteer sample ($M = 1.98, SD = 0.66$) scored lower ($t(396) = 2.69, p < .01, d = 0.28$) than the student sample did ($M = 2.17, SD = 0.69$) on the Dark Triad. The volunteer sample ($M = 2.81, SD = 0.69$) scored lower ($t(396) = 6.08, p < .01, d = 0.64$) than the student sample did ($M = 3.21, SD = 0.50$) on the use of soft tactics. The volunteer sample

### Table 3
Hierarchical multiple regression showing the mediation of the sex difference in the adoption of hard tactics by the Dark Triad composite.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Sex of the participant</td>
<td>$-0.16$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Sex of the participant</td>
<td>$-0.02$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dark Triad composite</td>
<td>$0.64$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $R^2$ for Step 1 was .02 but in Step 2 it was .41.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and standardized regression coefficients (in brackets) for the relationship between the Dark Triad of traits and workplace manipulation tactics.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table 2</strong></td>
<td>Means and Standard Deviations for sex differences in the Dark Triad traits and the use of tactics of influence at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table 2</strong></td>
<td>Means and Standard Deviations for sex differences in the Dark Triad traits and the use of tactics of influence at work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
encourage our non-student sample to participate. We feel that vol-
unteers may suffer subject fatigue more quickly because there is no
incentive like in college-student samples. Third, we did not address
problems for any company, supervisor, and fellow employee.
Learning how those high on the Dark Triad traits behave at work
may permit preventative measures to be taken or at least, an
understanding of what to expect from them. In this study, we
examined the role the Dark Triad traits play in predicting the tac-
tics of influence used by those high on the Dark Triad traits. In
short, we have shown that those high on these personality traits
may use an array of tactics to influence others in the workplace
but that men who are high on the Dark Triad may disproportion-
ally use hard tactics.

References
Ames, D. (2009). Pushing up to a point: Assertiveness and effectiveness in
leadership and interpersonal dynamics. Research in Organizational Behavior,
29, 111–133.
Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator–mediator variable distinction in
social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations.
Public Affairs, 10, 300–312.
Brunell, A. B., Gentry, W. A., Campbell, W. K., Hoffman, B. J., Kuhnert, K. W., &
role of manager personality and supervisor leadership style. Journal of
Organizational Behavior, 24, 197–214.
Press.
narcissism, perfectionism, and dispositional affect related to workaholism.
Personality and Individual Differences, 48, 786–791.
Reports, 68, 635–646.
(Ed.), Studies in social power (pp. 150–167). Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social
Research.
Galperin, B. L., Bennett, R. J., & Aquino, K. (2010). Status differentiation and the
protein self: A social-cognitive model of unethical behavior in organizations.
tendencies by means of the California Psychological Inventory. International
Journal of Selection and Assessment, 10, 58–86.
side of personality. The Leadership Quarterly, 22, 495–509.

(M = 1.78, SD = 0.83) scored lower (\( \beta = 6.32, p < .01, d = 0.67 \))
than the student sample did (\( M = 2.36, SD = 0.90 \)) on the use of soft
tactics. Fourth, the mediation effect replicated when running it
separately based on sample-type, where the sex differences in the
volunteer (\( \beta = -1.4, t = -2.26, p < .05 \)) and the student sample
(\( \beta = -3.1, t = -3.88, p < .01 \)) were fully mediated by the Dark Triad
composite (\( \beta < .66, ts < 10.60, ps < .01 \)). Therefore, because our
central analyses were not obscured by age differences in our sam-
ples, it seems reasonable to collapse the samples in this study. Nev-
evertheless, more detail can be provided by contacting the first

4. Discussion

Toxic or not, employees need to get work done through the mutual
influence and interaction with others in the workplace, and thus,
the topic of workplace influence has received interest for at
least 50 years (Ames, 2009; French & Raven, 1959). However, it
was not until recently that toxic employees and leaders have come
under investigation (Amernic & Craig, 2010; Boddy, 2010; Kiazad
et al., 2010). The personality traits of the Dark Triad have been
the focus of these investigations, and it is from that literature we
take our lead. In the present study, we examined how the Dark
Triad traits are associated with the adoption of different tactics
of influence.

Our paper takes a different approach than most work on these
traits in the workforce. Instead of examining the unethical behav-
ior (Amernic & Craig, 2010) or deleterious effects (Kessler et al.,
2010) of their presence, we demonstrated how the associations be-
tween the Dark Triad reflect specific associations with parts of the
Trip. The use of tactics like threats primarily reflects differences in
psychopathy. The use of charm and overt manipulation of the per-
son or the situation reflects differences in Machiavellianism. The
use of one’s appearance reflects differences in narcissism. The cor-
rrelations between the Dark Triad traits were stronger in reference
to the adoption of hard tactics over soft tactics. It seems to us that
the Dark Triad traits may facilitate workplace influence through
the use of forceful, aggressive, and ultimately, hard tactics of social
influence in the workplace. Such a contention is consistent with
the focus of these investigations, and it is from that literature we
we have adopted self-report measures as others have done in this
author. Nevertheless, more detail can be provided by contacting the first

452


