



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

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ABSTRACT

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.

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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 (Amernic & 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, Lönnqvist, 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, Ladyshevsky, & Galvin, 2010). Despite numerous studies on workplace manipulation (Anderson, Spataro, & Flynn, 2008; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Lamude & 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., ingratiation 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

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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 & Clabour, 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, ingratiation, 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, competitive, hostile, unilateral, and aggressive workplace behavior of toxic employees (Ames, 2009), we expect the adoption of tactics of being a *team player* and *compromise* should not be correlated with any of the Dark Triad traits.

Men tend to adopt harder tactics of influence in the workplace (DuBruin, 1991; Lamude, 1994) and score higher on the Dark Triad traits than women do (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009). Having higher levels of the Dark Triad traits may facilitate the rise to upper-level positions, management positions, and leadership roles (Boddy et al., 2010; Duehr & Bono, 2006; Heilman, 2001; Paunonen et al., 2006). Specifically, the Dark Triad may mediate the sex difference in the adoption of hard tactics for workplace influence. In addition, given that assertiveness at its extremes may be synonymous with the Dark Triad traits (Ames, 2009), we expect the Dark Triad to be correlated with the use of assertiveness in men and not in women.

Personality traits like the Dark Triad have been receiving considerable attention in research about the workplace. Oddly, those high on the Dark Triad traits tend to be overly represented in higher levels in their companies or places of work (Boddy, 2010; Boddy et al., 2010). Because individuals ascend the hierarchy through success at their job, these individuals must be able to influence those around them. In the present study, we assess how the Dark Triad traits are related to the adoption of a range of tactics of influence in the workplace in a sample of individuals who have worked within the last year.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Four hundred nineteen participants (30% male; 65% female) aged 18–61 years ($M = 22.78$; $SD = 6.95$) who had been employed

within the last year were solicited to take part in an online study on work behavior.¹ Two hundred and seventy-seven psychology students (28% male; 72% female) aged 18–55 years ($M = 21.12$; $SD = 5.65$) from a Southeastern United States university received course credit for participation. One hundred and forty-two volunteers (61% female; 39% male) from the United States and Canada aged 18–61 years old ($M = 25.85$; $SD = 8.02$) participated in the study (sampled through a snowball sampling email). The participants were informed of the nature of the study and gave consent before completing the measures. Upon completion of the online survey, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

2.2. Measures

The “Dirty Dozen” measure of the Dark Triad was used (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) with statements such as: “I tend to want others to admire me”; “I tend to lack remorse”; and “I have used deceit or lied to get my way”. These items were averaged together to create an index of narcissism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$), Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .79$), psychopathy ($\alpha = .79$), and all three ($\alpha = .86$).

The use of manipulation tactics was measured with a series of single-items (DuBruin, 1991), asking participants how often (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) they used a given tactic to influence others when at work. These tactics are listed in the tables. Using a combination of face-validity and assessments of internal consistency, we created averaged, composites of the above single-items into indexes of soft and hard tactics (Yukl & Falbe, 1990). Soft tactics included *being a team player*, *charm*, *appearance*, *joking or kidding*, *compromise*, *exchange of a favor*, *promise of reward*, *ingratiation*, *alliances*, and *offering compliments* ($\alpha = .76$). Hard tactics included *threat of appeal*, *threat of punishment*, *manipulation of the person*, and *manipulation of the situation* ($\alpha = .75$).

3. Results

In Table 1, we report descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the Dark Triad traits and the use of the tactics of influence at work. Tactics like logic/reason and compromise were the primary tactics used by our samples to influence others at work; however, it appears the Dark Triad traits are more strongly correlated with the used of hard tactics as compared to soft tactics. The correlations were higher with the use of hard tactics in psychopathy (Fisher’s $z = -4.48$, $p < .01$), Machiavellianism ($z = -4.21$, $p < .01$), and the Dark Triad composite ($z = -4.30$, $p < .01$), but not with narcissism ($z = -1.17$).

In order to isolate where the correlations between the Dark Triad traits and different tactics of influence were, we conducted multiple regressions with the three traits entered as predictors to control for the shared variance among them (see Table 1, coefficients in brackets). The use of hard tactics was associated with high scores on psychopathy and Machiavellianism while the use of soft tactics was associated with high scores on narcissism and Machiavellianism. In addition, it was Machiavellianism (11 cases) and psychopathy (8 cases) that were associated with the use of more tactics of influence at work than narcissism (5 cases).

In Table 2, we report the results of a series of tests for sex differences in the Dark Triad traits and the use of the manipulation tactics. Men scored higher on the Dark Triad traits than women did. Men were more likely than women were to use the tactics of manipulating the person, manipulating the situation, building alliances, threats of appeal, and commonly used hard tactics.

¹ Past work has simply sampled students who had “some employment history” (Lee, Ashton, & de Vries, 2005, p. 184).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and standardized regression coefficients (in brackets) for the relationship between the Dark Triad of traits and workplace manipulation tactics.

	Mean (SD)	M	P	N	DT
Machiavellianism (M)	2.09 (0.86)	–	–	–	–
Psychopathy (P)	1.83 (0.79)	.56**	–	–	–
Narcissism (N)	2.38 (0.91)	.57**	.32**	–	–
Dark Triad composite (DT)	2.10 (0.69)	.88**	.75**	.82**	–
Team play	3.72 (0.99)	–.05 [–.05]	–.11 [–.11]	.05 [.12*]	–.03
Charm	3.22 (1.16)	.39** [.35**]	.17** [–.08]	.32** [.15**]	.37*
Appearance	2.75 (1.26)	.39** [.27**]	.24** [.04]	.33** [.17**]	.40**
Manipulation of situation	2.45 (1.19)	.61** [.47**]	.46** [.17**]	.39** [.07]	.59**
Manipulation of person	2.19 (1.20)	.63** [.51**]	.49** [.18**]	.39** [.04]	.62**
Assertiveness	3.27 (1.04)	.18** [.11]	.13** [.03]	.16** [.09]	.19**
Joking or kidding	3.53 (1.13)	.33** [.27**]	.25** [.08]	.21** [.04]	.32**
Exchange of favors	3.17 (1.17)	.23** [.20**]	.19** [.09]	.10 [–.04]	.21**
Promise of reward	2.55 (1.12)	.13** [.02]	.13** [.09]	.16** [.12*]	.18**
Threat of punishment	1.61 (0.91)	.22** [.03]	.31** [.27**]	.17** [.06]	.28**
Ingratiation	1.94 (0.96)	.28** [.14*]	.26** [.15*]	.24** [.11]	.32**
Logic or reason	3.98 (0.94)	.10* [–.04]	.17** [.17**]	.11* [.08]	.16**
Alliances	2.87 (1.18)	.37** [.11]	.30** [.23**]	.19** [.05]	.31**
Threat of appeal	1.82 (0.95)	.30** [.16*]	.32** [.23**]	.19** [.02]	.34**
Compliments	3.25 (1.15)	.23** [.22**]	.08 [–.08]	.19** [.10]	.21**
Compromise	3.60 (0.98)	.08 [.06]	.05 [.02]	.05 [.01]	.08
Soft tactics	3.06 (0.64)	.42** [.29**]	.29** [.09]	.33** [.14*]	.43**
Hard tactics	2.15 (0.92)	.64** [.48**]	.53** [.24**]	.40** [.05]	.64**

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

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 1 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., soft and hard), we only found one case of moderation by the sex of the participant. Scores on the Dark Triad composite were corre-

lated 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 ($t(396) = -6.85, p < .01, d = -0.67$) 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 partialled the age variance associated with participants' age and all our correlations remained significant ($pr_s < .40, ps < .01$). 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 2

Means and Standard Deviations for sex differences in the Dark Triad traits and the use of tactics of influence at work.

	Mean (SD)		<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Men	Women		
<i>Dark Triad</i>				
Machiavellianism	2.31 (0.98)	1.98 (0.78)	3.54**	0.37
Psychopathy	2.07 (0.85)	1.72 (0.72)	4.15**	0.44
Narcissism	2.58 (0.94)	2.28 (0.88)	3.05**	0.26
Composite	2.32 (0.74)	2.00 (0.64)	4.38**	0.46
<i>Manipulation tactic</i>				
Team play	3.76 (0.98)	3.70 (0.99)	0.59	0.06
Charm	3.25 (1.18)	3.21 (1.15)	0.30	0.03
Appearance	2.63 (1.23)	2.80 (1.27)	–1.27	–0.14
Manipulation of situation	2.66 (1.19)	2.34 (1.16)	2.50*	0.27
Manipulation of person	2.44 (1.27)	2.07 (1.14)	2.89**	0.31
Assertiveness	3.34 (1.13)	3.23 (0.99)	0.99	0.10
Joking or kidding	3.62 (1.15)	3.49 (1.12)	1.07	0.11
Exchange of favors	3.23 (1.20)	3.15 (1.16)	0.64	0.07
Promise of reward	2.62 (1.15)	2.52 (1.11)	0.87	0.09
Threat of punishment	1.71 (0.95)	1.56 (0.89)	1.51	0.16
Ingratiation	1.97 (0.93)	1.92 (0.98)	0.41	0.05
Logic or reason	4.10 (0.95)	3.92 (0.94)	1.85	0.19
Alliances	3.08 (1.13)	2.78 (1.19)	2.34*	0.26
Threat of appeal	1.97 (1.00)	1.76 (0.92)	2.05*	0.22
Compliments	3.37 (1.16)	3.19 (1.15)	1.38	0.15
Compromise	3.55 (1.00)	3.62 (0.97)	–0.71	–0.07
Soft tactics	3.11 (0.65)	3.04 (0.64)	0.96	0.11
Hard tactics	2.35 (0.95)	2.05 (0.88)	3.11**	0.38

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table 3

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

		β	<i>t</i>
Step 1	Sex of the participant	–.16	–3.11**
Step 2	Sex of the participant	–.02	–0.48
	Dark Triad composite	.64	15.99**

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

($M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.83$) scored lower ($t(396) = 6.32$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.67$) 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 ($\beta = -.14$, $t = -2.26$, $p < .05$) and the student sample ($\beta = -.31$, $t = -3.88$, $p < .01$) were fully mediated by the Dark Triad composite ($\beta s < .66$, $t s < 10.60$, $p s < .01$). Therefore, because our central analyses were not obscured by age differences in our samples, it seems reasonable to collapse the samples in this study. Nevertheless, more detail can be provided by contacting the first author.

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 behavior (Amernic & Craig, 2010) or deleterious effects (Kessler et al., 2010) of their presence, we demonstrated how the associations between the Dark Triad reflect specific associations with parts of the Triad. The use of tactics like threats primarily reflects differences in psychopathy. The use of charm and overt manipulation of the person or the situation reflects differences in Machiavellianism. The use of one's appearance reflects differences in narcissism. The correlations 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 work on extreme cases of assertiveness (Ames, 2009), Machiavellianism (Kessler et al., 2010; Kiazad et al., 2010), and narcissism (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). In addition, we were able to show that men's tendency to adopt this approach to workplace manipulation as compared to women was fully mediated by the Dark Triad. This suggests these traits are fundamental at facilitating the adoption of this attitude toward others in the workplace.

As we noted earlier, traits like the Dark Triad are not uncommon in upper-level management and CEOs (Amernic & Craig, 2010; Galperin et al., 2010). This begs interesting questions for future work. How do these employees climb the corporate ladder? Are the manipulation tactics we have spelled out part of their repertoire? Are soft tactics more effective than hard tactics by enabling the user to retain their job while permitting workplace success? Are corporate psychopaths made by work environments focusing on immediate, short-term outcomes? Are corporate psychopaths able to use these tactics to successfully negotiate the workplace or exploit others to attain power that is consistent with their psychology? Many questions remain about the role the Dark Triad traits play in the workplace. We have provided some insight into the way in which these individuals may behave.

The current study was limited in some ways worth noting. First, we have adopted self-report measures as others have done in this field (Hakstian, Farrell, & Tweed, 2002; Lucas & Friedrich, 2005) but we felt this important for ease of administration for our volunteer sample. Second, we capitalized on two brief measures in order to

encourage our non-student sample to participate. We feel that volunteers may suffer subject fatigue more quickly because there is no incentive like in college-student samples. Third, we did not address the relative status of the manipulator or the manipulated (Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990; Yukl & Tracey, 1992) or the industry or situational fit (Ames, 2009; Boddy, 2010). Fourth, although there were differences by sample-type (e.g., volunteer vs. college-student), we felt these were uninterpretable given differences in age, education-level, work experience, and current work situation. For instance, it could be that the lower scores we found in the Dark Triad traits among our volunteers is spuriously driven by their willingness to help out in research via an email request (i.e., altruism). Moreover, because our primary analyses (i.e., correlation, regression, and mediation) were robust to this distinction we feel confident in reporting the results from a unified sample. Last, we did not control for the jangle fallacy by controlling for the Big Five (Cable & Judge, 2003). Given that prior work suggests the Dark Triad's associations with work-outcomes remain after controlling for the Big Five (Clark, Lelchook, & Taylor, 2010; Paunonen et al., 2006) we did not feel this was necessary.

Toxic employees, as embodied by the Dark Triad traits, present 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 tactics 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 disproportionately use hard tactics.

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