Thinking Bigger and Better About ''Bad Apples'': Evolutionary Industrial–Organizational Psychology and the Dark Triad

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The focal article by Guenole (2014) correctly contends that industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology has been overly reliant on the Big Five or the five-factor model (Benet-Martínez & John, 1998). Although popular and useful, the Big Five also tends to be limited in

two important ways. The Big Five is a set of atheoretically derived, descriptive adjectives, and it tends to better tap ''positive'' aspects of people's personality over ''negative'' or ''darker'' sides. A number of authors have highlighted the importance of examining ''darker'' aspects of people's personality both outside (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and within (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012) the workplace. As potential mechanisms to explore the ''darker'' aspects of the workplace, the author of the focal article suggests the Dark Triad of personality (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). Although the focal article was not solely about these three, we use them as examples to illustrate a broader point: An evolutionary perspective can provide a foundational theory through which workplace phenomenon can be examined with greater richness.

The Dark Triad are linked to risk taking (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010), racism (Jones, 2013), limited self-control (Jonason & Tost, 2010), and workplace manipulation (Jonason, Slomski, et al., 2012), leading to labels like ''toxic'' employee and ''bad apple'' (Brunell et al., 2008; Penney & Spector, 2002; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). For instance, narcissism has been linked to unethical behavior in CEOs (Amernic & Craig, 2010; Galperin, Bennett, & Aquino, 2010) and a high 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, supervisory, and team commitment (Zettler, Friedrich, & Hilbig, 2011), along with a tendency to be perceived as abusive by subordinates (Kiazad et al., 2010) and to focus on maintaining power and using manipulative behaviors to achieve that goal (Kessler et al., 2010). This view of the Dark Triad conforms to traditional perceptions of the traits (Campbell & Miller, 2011; Kowalski, 2001) but also tends to be simplistic and one sided.

To gain further insight, it may be useful to apply an evolutionary lens. Indeed, the surge of work on the Dark Triad (see Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012) has, in part, been the result of its integration within an evolutionary paradigm (Jonason, Jones, & Lyons, 2013; Jonason, Koenig, et al., 2010; Jonason & Schmitt, 2012; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011; Jonason & Webster, 2012; Jonason et al., 2009). From the evolutionary perspective, the Dark Triad traits (and ''darker'' personality traits; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005) are seen not just in terms of their problematic associations but also as adaptive mechanisms for solving some of life's fundamental challenges (e.g., seeking status, finding mates, protecting kin) for some individuals. In essence, these individuals have adopted (for reasons we will not go into here) an acutely agentic, short-term social strategy (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2012). By carefully considering the features of such a strategy and how they might be designed to interact with the environment, an evolutionary perspective could provide an even more sophisticated—and balanced—understanding of the manner by which the Dark Triad (and other ''darker'' aspects of personality) function in the workplace.

Does evolutionary psychology really have anything to do with the workplace? The evolutionary psychological paradigm proposes that human behavior is based on basic, evolved psychological mechanisms, which evolved to allow humans to operate in social groups toward relatively collective ends. The workplace is just such a group. However, because there are differences between the modern workplace and the ancestral environment, it is important to consider how evolved mechanisms process the modern contexts and play out in social interactions (e.g., Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003). Along these lines, some researchers have begun investigating I–O psychology from an evolutionary perspective (e.g., Van Vugt, De Cremer, & Janssen, 2007; Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008).

The focal article presents a descriptive way of understanding the role of "dark" personality traits in I–O contexts. Although potentially informative and a good way to start, this approach may be limited in its ability to reveal the motivations behind such traits and how such motivations interact with the environment to produce behavior. In this regard, an evolutionary paradigm may be helpful, drawing upon basic theoretical concepts governing all living organisms and setting out in advance the types of relationships one would expect and why (Confer et al., 2010). Moreover, an evolutionary perspective would allow research to extend beyond a consideration of proximal mechanisms (the "how" question), by considering ultimate explanations (the "why" question). In reference to the Dark Triad, a "how" question might be concerned with the types of workplace manipulation used (Jonason, Slomki, et al., 2012) but a "why" question would suggest that individuals would use manipulation toward highly specific, adaptive ends like finding mates or acquiring status (Jonason & Webster, 2012). As a result of following an atheoretical approach, researchers are more concerned with questions of structural relations and incremental validity as opposed to exploring theoretically derived predictions (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; Raskin & Terry, 1988). For instance, new insights could be gained by considering the possibility that although some actions at work are motivated by gaining social status (e.g., workplace manipulation), others could be motivated by a need to find mates (e.g., sexual harassment), and yet others could be about prioritizing kin (e.g., nepotism, absenteeism). Motives may be particularly strong in certain individuals and may be more likely to manifest in certain environments; identifying these factors and considering how they might be expected to interact can lead to better models for predicting (and managing) workplace dynamics.

In contrast to the context-free approach discussed in the focal article, a context-specific model might be more powerful. Indeed, context specificity is a major advantage of evolutionary models (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) but has also been noted as important in I–O research (Pervin, 1968; Tett & Burnett, 2003). One particular context that might bear particularly useful examination is the distinction between short- and long-term contexts. Both work on the Dark Triad (Jonason et al., 2009, 2011) and in I–O (Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005) suggest this distinction is fundamentally important to understanding where "dark" personality traits are adaptive and where they are not. It may be that jobs where time is of the essence, where risk is high, and where there is little future for further interaction ex post facto, "dark" personality traits could prove useful but, in any long-term enterprise requiring the interaction of many people, "dark" personality traits may be a hindrance.

In closing, we agree with the focal article's fundamental premise: work in I–O psychology must concern itself with the "darker" aspects of human nature. However, we feel a clearer vision is needed for the future of I–O psychology. One feature of a good theory is its generativity or its ability to make future predictions. Evolutionary theory and, by extension, evolutionary psychology have that generativity through a priori assumptions and context specificity. In short, an evolutionary model will not seek to weed out proverbial bad apples but, instead, seek to find the appropriate niches (i.e., job) for individuals based on a consideration of how their personality is designed to function. Although one might want to throw "bad apples" out, it might be that those high on traits like the Dark Triad are not so much "bad apples," but, instead, are apples that are just not that sweet. With those apples one must find another purpose for them like making cider, sauce, pie, and even hard cider.

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