Dark personality, job performance ratings, and the role of political skill: An indication of why toxic people may get ahead at work

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ABSTRACT

While toxic employees are generally not superior performers, some receive higher salaries and advance into leadership positions. In this study, an indirect effect chain model was tested which proposes that dark employees receive good performance ratings through political skill. Dark personality was operationalized by low scores on the honesty-humility factor of the HEXACO personality model. One hundred and ten employees provided self-ratings on honesty-humility and political skill. Their supervisors provided observer ratings on political skill and job performance. Results show a positive *direct* effect of honesty-humility on the performance measure of team facilitation and support at the same time the opposing *indirect* effect hypothesis: Dark, as opposed to honest-humble, employees are more likely to view themselves as politically skilled, and when equally perceived as politically skilled by their supervisors, they receive higher ratings on task performance and team facilitation. Because performance is important for career advancement, the model leads to a potential explanation of why toxic individuals may get ahead at work.

1. Introduction

We have seen them, and you have seen them too: Toxic people who progress and climb the career ladder, in organizations and in politics. Oftentimes, their toxicity becomes apparent only too late, once damage is done. There might be warning signs, but toxic individuals do receive support from those who perceive them as high performers. Performance is important for getting ahead (e.g., Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Longenecker & Fink, 2008).

In their review of dark personality at work, Spain, Harms, and LeBreton (2014) describe the *honesty-humility* factor from the HEXACO personality model as capturing a general tendency towards the dark side and recommend it as a broad measure of dark personality. While the positive pole of honesty-humility is defined by sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty, individuals low on honesty-humility are sly, greedy, conceited, pompous, pretentious, hypocritical, and boastful. They seek to obtain favors by flattering others and pretending to like them, they show a willingness to exploit others, they consider themselves as superior, and they feel entitled to privileges (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2004).

Jonason, Slomski, and Partyka (2012) introduced the term 'toxic employees' for employees high on the Dark Triad, i.e., those with high scores on the personality traits Machiavellianism, narcissism, and/or psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). While these three personality traits are distinctively different from each other (Jones & Paulhus,

2011), comparative research (Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015; Lee et al., 2013) led to the conclusion that the common *core* of the Dark Triad is practically identical with low honesty-humility (Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014; Lee & Ashton, 2014). In this current study, dark employees are identified through low scores on honesty-humility.

Research has shown that low honesty-humility is related to egoism and egotism (de Vries, de Vries, de Hoogh, & Feij, 2009), materialism, social adroitness, unethical business decisions (Ashton & Lee, 2008), counterproductive work behavior, workplace delinquency, and low integrity (Lee, Ashton, & de Vries, 2005; Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007). Whereas honest individuals act in cooperative ways, low scorers on honesty-humility take more selfish decisions (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009), and they tend to be vengeful and take calculated revenge (Lee & Ashton, 2012). They are more likely to engage in cheating behavior (Kleinlogel, Dietz, & Antonakis, 2017) and in anti-social workplace behavior against individuals and the organization (Lee, Ashton, & Shin, 2005). Honesty-humility has not been found to be related to task performance, but honest-humble employees tend to show higher contextual performance (Oh et al., 2014). Mirroring the results from above studies, Dark Triad personalities are also more likely to engage in unethical and fraudulent behavior (Harrison, Summers, & Mennecke, 2016), engage in counterproductive work behavior, and do not tend to be high performers (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). However, as a contradiction to these results, some dark employees receive higher salaries and progress in their careers (Hirschi & Jaensch,

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2015; Lilienfeld, Latzman, Watts, Smith, & Dutton, 2014; Spurk, Keller, & Hirschi, 2016).

The aim of this study is to contribute to theory building on dark personalities by demonstrating a mechanism that provides a potential explanation of why some toxic individuals may get ahead. Specifically, dark personality is proposed as a potential antecedent to political skill, and an indirect effect chain model is tested: Dark employees are more likely than honest-humble employees to describe themselves as politically skilled; and supervisors who perceive these employees as politically skilled do rate them as high performers. The results of this study provide a potential explanation for the contradictory observations that dark personalities are generally not superior performers, but that there are dark individuals who are able to progress in their careers.

2. Theoretical backgrounds and model development

2.1. Dark individuals and political skill

Political skill is a social competence that includes networking ability, social astuteness, interpersonal influence, and apparent sincerity. Employees with political skill are able to use their skill to pursue personal and organizational goals (Ferris, Treadway, et al., 2005). They connect with those who are potentially helpful in accomplishing their goals; they adapt flexibly to social and work situations in order to obtain desired responses from others; they easily develop rapport and communicate well; and they appear to others as sincere and genuine. Political skill is conceptualized as a malleable competency with personal dispositions as antecedents (Ferris et al., 2007). Personality provides the motivational basis for goal-directed behavior. It drives behavior and the choice of situations to be involved in (Snyder, 1983). It is hypothesized in the following that dark personality serves as an antecedent to political skill.

Ferris et al. (2007) argue that individuals with high need for achievement and power are motivated to use political skill. Empirical studies found that individuals low on honesty-humility have *extrinsic* life aspirations, such as financial success, social recognition, and appearance (Visser & Pozzebon, 2013), and a goal motivation that is characterized by striving to outperform others and receive favorable judgments about one's competence (Dinger et al., 2015; Louw, Dunlop, Yeo, & Griffin, 2016). Similarly, Dark Triad personalities do value achievement and power (Kajonius, Persson, & Jonason, 2015). Jonason, Li, and Teicher (2010) suggested that dark personalities are successful and get what they want by applying an agentic social style. While political skill has been positively described as a tool that can advance personal and organizational goals, it may also be used in a self-serving manner which disguises underlying ulterior motives (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005). According to Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, self-ratings of political skill capture a mix of ability, self-confidence, and also motivation. Dark individuals would be motivated to attain political skill and use it for their goal-attainment. Therefore, dark employees would be likely to describe themselves as politically skilled.

2.2. Employee-supervisor concordance in political skill ratings

In Hogan's (1996) socioanalytic theory, observer ratings capture reputation, based on observable behavioral cues, whereas self-ratings capture a person's identity. Observer rating accuracy requires the availability, detection, and utilization of relevant behavioral cues (Funder, 1995). On the other hand, self-ratings are susceptible to self-deception (Paulhus, 1984). Individuals with weak abilities and skills overestimate their efficacy, as they lack the self-insight to evaluate themselves correctly (Ehrlinger, Johnson, Banner, Dunning, & Kruger, 2008). However, even when inflation occurs, self-ratings do still predict objective measures of the same construct, e.g. of intelligence, though to a limited extent (Paulhus, Lysy, & Yik, 1998).

As with other skills and abilities, there would be individuals who overestimate their level of proficiency in political skill (Ferris, Davidson, et al., 2005). On the other hand, supervisors may not detect and correctly utilize all cues of political skill. While differences between self-ratings and supervisor ratings are therefore expected, these ratings do still share common variance. Empirically, self-ratings and supervisor ratings of political skill are lowly to moderately related (Meurs, Gallagher, & Perrewé, 2010; Momm, Blickle, & Liu, 2010, 2013).

2.3. Supervisor ratings of employees' political skill and job performance

Employees with political skill understand and influence others at work, which enables them to pursue personal and organizational goals (Ferris et al., 2007). Politically skilled behaviors, such as connecting and networking confidently with important people, sensing the motivations of others and knowing how to present oneself, developing good rapport and influencing others, and displaying interest in others should help in performing well on the job, or at least in being perceived by superiors as performing well.

Meta-analytic results show that political skill is related to ratings of task and contextual job performance (Bing, Davison, Minor, Novicevic, & Frink, 2011). Also in longitudinal studies, political skill predicted job performance ratings (Blickle et al., 2011; Hochwarter et al., 2007) and ratings of career growth potential (Liu, Liu, & Wu, 2010).

2.4. Indirect effect chain from dark personality to job performance via political skill

Above, the links were presented (1) from dark personality to self-ratings of political skill, (2) from self-ratings of political skill to supervisor ratings of employees' political skill, and (3) from supervisor ratings of employees' political skill to supervisor ratings of employees' job performance. This chain leads to the hypothesis that dark employees would receive higher performance ratings. However, empirical results show the contrary: In a study with medical care providers, employees on the positive pole of the personality dimension honesty-humility received higher performance ratings (Johnson, Rowatt, & Petrini, 2011), and in a study with military officer candidates, honesty-humility was positively related to contextual performance and unrelated to task performance (Oh et al., 2014). It is therefore unreasonable to hypothesize a direct or total effect from dark personality on performance ratings. However, following Mathieu and Taylor's (2006) differentiation between indirect effect and mediation, an *indirect* effect is hypothesized, linking dark personality to performance ratings *through* self-rated political skill and supervisor rated political skill. The proposed model is depicted in Fig. 1.
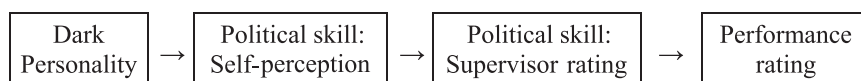
Dark Personality → Political skill: Self-perception → Political skill: Supervisor rating → Performance rating

Fig. 1. Indirect effect chain model.