



Are they among us? A conceptual framework of the relationship between the dark triad personality and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs)



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ABSTRACT

In light of the growing interest in the dark side of organizations in mainstream research, two concepts related to organizational behavior and management literature have received attention in recent years: counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) and dark triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy). It is only natural that current studies have tried to find a relationship between them; however, their findings were not impressive. This paper contends that the reason for the weak relationship found between the dark triad traits and CWBs is perhaps that studies have ignored some important mediators and moderators in this relationship. This conceptual paper presents a model of this relationship, arguing that perceptions of organizational politics and perceived accountability are two mediators of the relationship between the dark triad personalities and CWBs. The model also advances four moderators: first, political skill is expected to moderate the relationship between the two mediators and the dark triad. Second, three organizational moderators (organizational transparency, organizational policies, and organizational culture/climate) are expected to moderate the relationship between the two mediators and CWBs. After presenting the model and the resulting propositions, the paper concludes with suggestions for future research regarding the proposed model.

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1. Introduction

Counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) are deliberate actions that harm the organization or its members (O'Boyle, Forsyth, & O'Boyle, 2011). They include a variety of acts that can be directed toward organizations (CWB-O) or toward other people (CWB-P). Destroying organizational property, purposely doing work incorrectly, and taking unauthorized work breaks are examples of CWB-O, whereas hitting a coworker, insulting others, and shouting at someone are forms of CWB-P. CWB is considered an umbrella term that subsumes, in part or whole, similar constructs concerning harmful behaviors at work, including aggression, deviance, retaliation, and revenge (Spector & Fox, 2010). According to Berry, Carpenter, and Barratt (2012) each type of CWB was treated, until recently, as a series of discrete incidents, resulting in separate literatures that focused on the measurement of specific CWBs, such as theft or harassment. Although there are conceptual distinctions between these related constructs, recent studies consider them a broad class of behaviors (Spector & Fox, 2010).

The growing interest in CWBs is not only due to conceptual/theoretical reasons, but also followed in the wake of public scandals during this century (Spain, Harms, & LeBreton, 2014). CWBs are considered one of the most costly behaviors in terms of damage incurred by organizations. According to Bennett and Robinson (2000), 15% of the employees in their study had reportedly stolen from their employer at least once. It has been estimated that 33% to 75% of all employees have engaged in behaviors such as theft, fraud,

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vandalism, sabotage, and voluntary absenteeism. Bennett and Robinson (2000) mentioned Lehmann, Holcom, and Simpson (1990) who reported that almost 25% of an employee sample in a large city in the southwestern US indicated knowledge of drug abuse among coworkers during the preceding year. Bennet and Robinson also mentioned Webb (1991), who found that 42% of a surveyed sample of women reported experiencing sexual harassment at work, and data from Northwestern Life Insurance Company (1993) showing 7% of an employee sample reported being victims of physical harassment. Wells (1999) reported that the collective damage to companies due to acts of employee theft and fraud may reach as much as \$400 billion dollars a year in the US alone according to the most recent survey of fraud examiners, published by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE). Galperin and Burke (2006) mentioned Mendoza (1999), who found that acts related to cyber deviance can cost up to US\$7.1 billion per year. Other expenses related to workplace deviance include insurance losses, a diminished reputation, and reduced employee performance (Galperin & Burke, 2006). According to Moore, Detert, Klebe Treviño, Baker, and Mayer (2012), the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners recently estimated that global businesses suffer annual losses of US\$2.9 trillion as a result of fraudulent activity. This is an enormous amount, indicating that unethical behavior is far more widespread than suggested by the intense focus on a few high-profile scandals covered by the major news media.

Moreover, studies estimated that CWBs not only cost organizations billions of dollars annually, but also have negative consequences for employees. For instance, being the target of these broad CWBs can lead to an employee's decreased job satisfaction and increased stress and intentions to quit, among other things (Berry et al., 2012). Corporate psychopaths were found to be key contributors to conflict and bullying (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012), and through this to low employee affective well-being and high CWBs (Boddy, 2014). Clearly, CWB should be a major concern for organizations around the world (Fine, Horowitz, Weigler, & Basis, 2010). Thus, it is crucial for organizational leaders and societal well-being that professionals understand and be able to predict who is likely to engage in such behaviors (Moore et al., 2012).

Despite the growing interest in CWBs as a research issue, not enough is known about the determinants of CWBs. The findings of several meta-analyses that were conducted on the relationship between CWBs and possible correlates exemplified this contention. Selgado (2002) found a weak to moderate relationship between CWBs and the big five personality dimensions. Berry, Ones, and Sackett (2007) and Berry et al. (2012) found that CWBs are related (negatively) to agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability. Weak to moderate relationships were found between CWBs and organizational justice, while the correlations between demographic variables and CWBs were negligible. Hershcovis et al. (2007) found that of the personal variables, gender (male) and the trait of anger were moderately related to workplace aggression. Other researchers also found a strong effect of gender (male) (Baughman et al., 2012; Bowling & Burns, 2015). The dimensions of organizational justice and poor leadership were also moderately related to workplace aggression (Hershcovis et al., 2007). Tests of integrity were found to be moderately related to CWBs in another in-depth meta-analysis (Van Iddekinge, Roth, Raymark, & Odle-Dusseau, 2012). Aggression (Berry, Sackett, & Tobares, 2010) and workplace harassment (Bowling & Beehr, 2006) were also found to be moderately related to CWBs. Finally, Schyns and Schilling (2013), in their meta-analysis, found quite a strong relationship between CWBs and destructive leadership.

The magnitude of the correlations found in these meta-analyses was quite modest. This implies that other explanations and directions must be sought to understand the causes of CWBs. One of the most provocative explanations suggested in recent literature, based on a clinical approach to CWBs (MacLane & Walmsley, 2010), is that the dark triad personalities are a possible determinant of CWBs in the workplace (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). The dark triad has been not been sufficiently studied in the literature on management, organizational behavior, and industrial psychology. In fact, it was even less sufficiently researched than CWBs. As mentioned by Harms and Spain (2015), the study of the dark personality and its impact in the workplace is only now entering the mainstream of organizational research. Smith and Lilienfeld (2013) noted that, in comparison to the high coverage of the concept by the media, only a few scholarly articles on the issue exist, citing fewer than 50 papers published from 1990 to October 2012. Smith and Lilienfeld (2013) argued that the divergence between popular coverage and the scientific research on business psychopathy is both substantial and troubling. Thus, although the problems posed by psychopathy in the workplace have been discussed widely in popular publications, this theoretically and pragmatically important issue has been the subject of relatively little systematic research. The outcome is that too little is known about CWBs and their determinants.

What is the conceptual definition of the dark triad? According to Smith and Lilienfeld (2013), the dark triad is a constellation of three theoretically separable, albeit empirically overlapping, personality constructs that are typically construed as interpersonally maladaptive: psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism. Although many researchers refer to the constructs comprising the dark triad as singular traits (e.g., psychopathy), it is more appropriate to conceptualize these constructs as multidimensional, composed of multiple attributes. This is because, while the traits that constitute the dark triad overlap, they are nonetheless relatively independent (Wu & Lebreton, 2011). Most research on the dark triad personality in the workplace is based on this model (Schyns, 2015). It should be noted, however, that in many instances the term psychopathy in the workplace is parallel to that of dark triad personality. This is because some researchers assumed that the three dimensions overlap (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and the term psychopathy can be used as an umbrella term to cover the dark triad. Therefore, in some of the following sections psychopathy is used as such an umbrella term when citing studies that applied this approach. This is particularly true for the terms *corporate psychopathy* or *successful psychopathy* that in fact refer to the dark triad but have become established terms themselves.

Of all the people with personality disorders, psychopaths (e.g., the dark triad personality) are the most studied in psychology and psychiatry (Boddy, 2010a). Psychologists have quite recently come to understand that a type of psychopath exists who is not prone to outbursts of impulsive, violent, criminal behavior and who therefore lives relatively undetected and successfully in society. They have been called successful psychopaths, because they successfully evade contact with legal authorities. Some of these successful psychopaths work in corporations and have been called Corporate Psychopaths, Organizational Psychopaths, or Executive Psychopaths. Corporate psychopaths comprise the mere 1% or so of people who are psychopathic and work in corporations. Very few research studies

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