When the dark ones gain power: Perceived position power strengthens the effect of supervisor Machiavellianism on abusive supervision in work teams

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ABSTRACT

Previous work has focused on the potential maladaptive consequences of the Dark Triad personality traits (i.e., Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) in organizational contexts. This research builds upon this work, examining the influence of supervisor position power on the relationship between supervisor Dark Triad traits and abusive supervision in teams. Regression analysis on the data of 225 teams revealed that supervisor Machiavellianism is positively related to abusive supervision in work teams, but only when supervisors perceive their position power to be high rather than low. We discuss how power may function as an amplifier, bringing behavioral consequences of predispositions, emotions and beliefs to the forefront. We also focus on the value of differentiating between the three Dark Triad traits in order to more fully understand how they may relate to the abuse of employees.

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1. Introduction

Recent instances of corporate misconduct have rekindled interest in leader personality traits as antecedents of negative behavior in the workplace, such as destructive leadership or abusive supervision (Wu and LeBreton, 2011). Three of those traits have received specific attention: Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism. These sub-clinical traits have been grouped under the umbrella term of the *Dark Triad* (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). All three traits are short-term, ego-centric, exploitive social strategies that correlate positively with the use of dishonest and manipulative behaviors (Jonason and Webster, 2010).

Interestingly, having these traits does not seem to stop individuals from gaining influence in organizations. In contrast, some have argued that these traits may help people build successful careers and secure promotions to leadership positions (Babiak et al., 2010). However, in a supervisory role, people scoring high on Dark Triad traits are in the position to potentially wreak considerable havoc. Indeed, Dark Triad traits have been associated with embezzlement, white-collar crimes,

unethical and risky decision-making, and lower engagement in corporate social responsibility (Jones, 2014; O'Boyle et al., 2012; Spain et al., 2014). Moreover, leader Dark Triad traits have been found to predict subordinate mistreatment (Babiak et al., 2010; Laurijssen et al., 2016). This study focuses on the latter maladaptive effect of leader Dark Triad traits by investigating the relationship between supervisors' Dark Triad traits and their engagement in abusive behaviors towards their team. A focus on abusive supervision -or the sustained display of non-physical hostility by supervisors towards their subordinates (Tepper, 2000)- is important, because abusive supervision negatively affects both employee attitudes (e.g., psychological distress, job dissatisfaction) and behaviors (e.g., job performance, workplace deviance; Tepper, 2007).

Notably, supervisor display of negative workplace behaviors may prove particularly detrimental when subordinates are highly dependent on their supervisors. This renders leader power, which entails control over others' outcomes (Anderson and Brion, 2014), crucial in our understanding of the relationship between leader Dark Triad traits and abusive supervision. Based on insights on the effects of power (Keltner et al., 2003), we contend that the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and abusive supervision may be more pronounced when supervisor power is high rather than low. With this research, we aim to add insight to our rather limited understanding of how supervisors'

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personality affects their behavior towards team members. Moreover, we hope to provide more insight into factors that potentially amplify or attenuate the destructive influence of Dark Triad traits at work.

1.1. Dark triad traits and their relationship with abusive supervision

Although all three traits are generally considered to be socially undesirable and they overlap to some extent, they are not the same and have some specific defining features (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). *Machiavellians* are characterized by cynical and misanthropic beliefs, callousness, a striving for argentic goals (i.e., money, power, and status), and the use of calculating and cunning manipulation tactics (Christie and Geis, 1970). *Psychopaths* are impulsive, thrill-seeking individuals, who lack empathy, feelings of guilt, are likely to lead an erratic lifestyle and to display anti-social behaviors (Hare, 2003). *Narcissists* have a strong sense of entitlement and a constant need for attention and admiration. They are haughty, vane, and see themselves as superior to others (Raskin and Terry, 1988). Leaders who possess at least one of these traits (and particularly those that score high on either Machiavellianism or psychopathy) have been shown to be ineffective in some way or another (e.g., Babiak et al., 2010; Krasikova et al., 2013; O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Only a limited number of studies have focused directly on abusive supervision. For instance, Kiazid et al. (2010) found supervisor Machiavellianism to be positively associated with subordinate perceptions of abusive supervision, and argued that authoritarian leadership behavior mediated this relationship. Furthermore, Laurijssen et al. (2016) found positive relationships between leader psychopathy and both abusive supervision and self-serving behavior. Notably, these relationships were weaker when the organization's ethical culture was stronger. Empirical studies focusing on the relationship between leader narcissism and abusive supervision are lacking. Moreover, those studies linking Dark Triad traits to abusive supervision have all focused on dyadic supervisor-subordinate interactions, and not on abusive supervision in a team setting. This difference is important because (a) dyads form and dissolve more quickly than groups; (b) people feel stronger and often different emotions in dyads than in groups; (c) in dyads employees only need to reflect on how they themselves are treated, while in the team context all members could be a potential target of abuse (see Moreland, 2010).

A more extensive, yet informative, body of research focuses on the Dark Triad traits and general displays of aggression or (perceptions of) malintent. For instance, several studies find Machiavellianism and psychopathy (more so than narcissism) to correlate negatively with communal tendencies (Rauthmann and Kolar, 2013a). Indeed, Rauthmann and Kolar (2013b) argue that 'it may seem that Machiavellianism and psychopathy form a "Malicious Two"', as these traits are uniquely related to stronger malevolence and negative perceptions of others as compared to narcissism which is perceived as "brighter" (p. 585). A recent study indicated that although Machiavellianism was not associated with overt or direct aggression, it was related to hostility. Psychopathy predicted the most overt and aggressive tendencies among the Dark Triad (Jones and Neria, 2015). Other studies have linked high Machiavellianism to a tendency to engage in counterproductive work behaviors, which includes harmful interpersonal acts similar to abuse (Dahling et al., 2009), and bullying at work (Pilch and Turska, 2015). Leader psychopathy has been negatively related to individual consideration (Westerlaken and Woods, 2013), and positively associated with corporate misbehavior (Clarke, 2005), workplace bullying, and unfair supervision (Boddy, 2011). For narcissists a more nuanced picture seems to arise from the literature. Narcissists engage in aggressive behaviors mainly towards those who threaten their ego, for instance, individuals who provide them with negative feedback. Left unprovoked, narcissists are not likely to display aggression (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998; Jones and Neria, 2015; Jones and Paulhus, 2010). Based on the available evidence, we therefore expect supervisor Machiavellianism and psychopathy to be positively related to perceptions of abusive supervision in teams (H1).

Several authors have argued that the extent to which negative supervisor traits are reflected in their behavior is not only a matter of the strength of the trait (Krasikova et al., 2013; Padilla et al., 2007), but instead, it is the combination of dispositional tendencies and contextual factors that predicts the occurrence of negative supervisor behavior. Hence, some factors may enable supervisors with dark traits to indulge in abuse, whereas others may suppress such behaviors. We argue that the degree to which supervisors' Machiavellianism or psychopathy will be reflected in their treatment of subordinates will depend on the amount of power they have.

1.2. The role of leader power

Power has been defined as asymmetric control over valued resources (Anderson and Brion, 2014). In a supervisory role, most individuals would have some authority to make decisions or to reward and punish subordinates. That is, their position in the organization gives them some control over resources (i.e., position power; Yukl and Falbe, 1991). However, not all supervisors will have the same amount of power at their disposal (Rus et al., 2010): some may have the authority to for instance reward or fire their subordinates, whereas others may not.

Interestingly, one's amount of power has substantial behavioral consequences (Anderson and Brion, 2014). Of relevance to the present study is the finding that power increases the correspondence between internal beliefs, states and traits on the one hand and behavior on the other (Galinsky et al., 2008). In terms of the effects of cognitions and knowledge structures on powerful individuals' behavior, researchers have found that leader self-construal affects self-interested behavior more strongly when leaders are more powerful (Wisse and Rus, 2012). Moreover, other studies have shown that powerful leaders acted more selfishly when they held self-serving effective leadership beliefs than when they endorsed group-serving effective leadership beliefs, whereas such effects were absent for less powerful leaders (Rus et al., 2010). Emotions have also been shown to influence behavior more strongly under conditions of high power. Leaders' contempt, for instance, was found to be more negatively related to their people orientation and ethical leadership, and more positively associated with dehumanization and self-serving behavior, when leaders were more powerful rather than less powerful (Sanders et al., 2015). Finally, evidence of personality variables having greater bearing on behavior under conditions of power stems from research showing that emotional instability prompts negative responses to feedback, especially for those who hold more power (Niemann et al., 2014).

Based on these findings, we argue that supervisors with preexisting tendencies that dampen concern for others and stimulate negative behaviors vis-à-vis others are more likely to engage in abusive supervision to the extent that they have more power. Although individuals scoring high on either one of the Dark Triad traits value power (Kajonius et al., 2015), not all of them will engage in more abusive supervision when they have power. Specifically, we hypothesize that supervisor Machiavellianism and psychopathy will be more strongly positively related to abusive supervision of team members with increasing levels of power (H2).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were collected in 225 Dutch teams from over 200 organizations across various industries in the profit and non-profit sector (ranging from divisions of Global Fortune 100 organizations stationed in the Netherlands to local groceries, and from insurance companies to newspapers). In each team, data were collected from both supervisors and