How innovative is your employee? The role of employee and supervisor Dark Triad personality traits in supervisor perceptions of employee innovative behavior

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ABSTRACT

Organizational researchers have focused on the potential benefits of the Dark Triad personality traits (i.e., psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism) in organizational contexts. The current research builds on this research, examining the link between employee and supervisor Dark Triad traits and perceived employee innovative behavior (idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation) on the workfloor. Regression analysis on the data of 306 pairs of employees and their supervisors revealed that employee Machiavellianism was negatively related and employee psychopathy was not related to supervisor ratings of employee innovative behavior. In addition, a positive relationship between employee narcissism and supervisor ratings of employee innovative behavior emerged. However, this effect was weakened by supervisor narcissism: only when supervisors themselves were low on narcissism did employee narcissism foster positive perceptions of employee innovative behavior (specifically idea promotion). We discuss the value of differentiating between the three Dark Triad traits and the subscales of innovative behavior in order to more fully understand supervisors' assessments of their employees.

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1. Introduction

The *Dark Triad* is a term used to describe a constellation of three sub-clinical personality traits: Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). All three are short-term, self-serving, exploitive social strategies that correlate positively with disagreeableness and the use of dishonest and manipulative behaviors (Jonason & Webster, 2010). *Machiavellians* are characterized by their cynical and misanthropic beliefs, their callousness, their striving for agentic goals (i.e., money, power, and status), and their use of calculating, deceitful, exploitative manipulation tactics (Christie & Geis, 1970; Rauthmann, 2012). *Psychopaths* are described as individuals who are short of empathy and feelings of guilt. It has been argued that they lack a moral compass and therefore have no qualms about interpersonal manipulation and the display of anti-social behaviors. Moreover, they are impulsive and thrill-seeking (Hare, 2003). *Narcissists*, finally, have a strong sense of entitlement and a constant need for attention and admiration. They are arrogant, consider themselves to be superior to others, and strive strongly for power, prestige, and status (Nevicka, Ten Velden, De Hoogh, & Van Vianen, 2011; Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Although the three traits are generally considered to be socially undesirable, recent research suggests that in organizational contexts, people may actually benefit from having these traits. For instance, it has been found that narcissistic individuals are more likely to emerge as leaders and are also perceived to be more effective as leaders (Brunell et al., 2008; Nevicka, Ten Velden et al., 2011), that psychopathy in managers is positively associated with ratings of charisma and presentation style (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010), and that Machiavellianism in employees is positively related to career commitment (Zettler, Friedrich, & Hilbir, 2010). These findings suggest that having these traits may be helpful in securing a successful career, and that—in the business context—it may pay off to confidently strive for one's own personal goals with little or no regard for others.

The present study expands this line of research by focusing on how employee Dark Triad personality traits may affect supervisor perceptions of employee innovative behavior. Employee innovativeness, or the intentional generation, promotion, and realization of new ideas within a work role, group or organization (Janssen, 2001), is essential for most contemporary work organizations. To cope with global competition and environmental uncertainty,

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organizations need employees to 'go the extra mile' and to exceed their standard work behaviors by engaging in innovative behavior (Janssen, 2001). Moreover, a supervisor's positive assessment of an employee's innovative behavior is important for employees, as it may substantially influence a supervisor's overall assessment of the subordinate's performance and her or his subsequent career success (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). In addition to studying employee traits, the current study also includes supervisor Dark Triad personality traits, in order to investigate how the congruence (or lack thereof) between supervisors' and employees' Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism shapes supervisor perceptions of the innovativeness of employees. By doing so, we hope to add insight to the—so far—limited understanding of how supervisor and employee personality may concurrently affect performance assessments of employees in general, and perceptions of innovative behavior in particular.

1.1. Dark Triad traits and their relationship with innovative behavior

Although few studies speak directly to the relationship between employee Dark Triad personality and perceptions of innovative behavior, there is some work that may help us to generate hypotheses on the matter. Most of this research focused on the effects of narcissism and creativity. Creativity (or the production of useful and novel ideas) is considered to be the starting point of innovation, and is also one of its facets (West, 2002). Narcissists are drawn to artistic careers (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014) and although they are not always more creative than non-narcissists, they tend to think they are (Furnham, Hughes, & Marshall, 2013; Goncalo, Flynn, & Kim, 2010). Moreover, they are skilled at persuading others to agree with them (also see Watts et al., 2013), suggesting that they are apt at eliciting positive perceptions of their competency in idea promotion (the second facet of innovative behaviors). Indeed, it has been found that more narcissistic students are judged as being more creative than less narcissistic students when asked to pitch creative ideas, partly because narcissists are more charismatic, witty, and enthusiastic (Goncalo et al., 2010). Arguably, when no objective information about an idea's creative quality is available, narcissists' self-aggrandizing behaviors can be very convincing, especially because they fit with commonly held prototypes of highly creative people (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003; Goncalo et al., 2010). CEO narcissism is also positively associated with managerial attention to, and adoption of, biotechnical innovations (Gerstner, König, Enders, & Hambrick, 2013). Explanations that have been offered are that narcissists' strong confidence allows them to invest aggressively in new technology, or that they expect that such investments will be seen as daring and worthy of admiration. Based on this previous research, we hypothesize that employee narcissism will be positively related to supervisor perceptions of employee innovative behavior (H1).

While research strongly suggests a relation between employee narcissism and innovative behavior, there is little theoretical or empirical basis for developing hypotheses regarding the role of Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Arguably, the psychopathic or Machiavellianistic personality type does not fit as well with the creative stereotype (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003) nor does it go hand in hand with an interest in artistic endeavors (Jonason et al., 2014). In addition, particularly Machiavellianism and psychopathy (more so than narcissism) correlate negatively with communal tendencies (becoming connected and getting along with others; Rauthmann & 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 from others as compared to narcissism which is perceived as

"brighter."(p. 585)". Given that positive assessments of an employee's innovative behavior may be rooted in her or his similarity to the creative personality (stereo)type and in her or his ability to generate positive perceptions, one might expect Machiavellianism and psychopathy to be negatively related to perceptions of employee innovative behavior. However, some evidence points to a positive relationship, at least for psychopathy. Primary psychopathy (characterized by emotional bluntness and callousness) has been found to be positively related to self-perceived entrepreneurial creativity (although not to entrepreneurship through innovation and invention; Akthar, Ahmetoglu, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013). In addition, positive correlations between psychopathy and peer ratings of individuals' ability to be creative/innovate have been reported (Babiak et al., 2010). In sum, the existence of a relationship between Machiavellianism and psychopathy on the one hand and perceived employee innovative behavior is—so far—unclear. To address this gap in the research literature, this study will examine their relatedness in an exploratory fashion.

1.2. Supervisor and employee congruence in Dark Triad personality traits

Goncalo et al. (2010) found that groups with two narcissistic members (out of four) outperformed groups with fewer or more narcissistic individuals in objective creative performance. They reasoned that because narcissists crave attention and recognition, competition between a few narcissistic group members could cause the group to engage in more elaborate and novel ways of information processing—and hence idea generation (e.g., De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008). However, we expect that in *hierarchic dyadic interactions*, in which the one person is asked to evaluate the performance of the other, feelings of competition may lead to a less positive assessment of the other person's behavior. That is, if supervisors score high on narcissism, they are probably less appreciative of an employee whom they perceive to be stealing their thunder, as this clashes with their self-absorbent, egocentric nature. In fact, narcissists are known to aggress against those who threaten their ego and to perceive them as less competent and likeable (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Kernis & Sun, 1994). Competition is especially likely to flare up in the idea promotion stage of innovation, because this is the most public or interpersonal stage. That is, the promotion of innovative ideas requires interaction with other individuals and hence provides the narcissistic individual with a stage to shine, something that they need in order to uphold their grandiose self-image (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, Beersma, & McIlwain, 2011). We therefore expect the interactive effects of employee and supervisor narcissism to be most pronounced in this stage. We hypothesize that the positive relationship between employee narcissism and supervisor perceptions of employee innovative behavior (particularly idea promotion) will be less pronounced when the supervisor is more narcissistic (H2). Because previous research has not looked into the interactive effect of supervisor and employee Machiavellianism and psychopathy on perceptions of innovative behavior, we will address the issue exploratively in the current study.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We obtained the data of 306 pairs of Dutch employees and their direct supervisors. Most worked in commercially oriented (service) organizations (e.g., shops, financial institutions, health care organizations, etc.). A total of 43.3% of the employees and 58.2% of the