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Beyond the Bright Side: Dark Personality at Work

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Abstract

Despite the long history of the psychological study of dark personality characteristics and the recent surge of interest in the topic, much work remains to fully understand the breadth and depth of the impact of dark personality in the workplace. This commentary briefly covers the history of dark personality, discusses the place of this special issue within that history, and then proposes a number of avenues for future research in terms of defining, measuring, and providing a more comprehensive theoretical framework for the study of dark personality.

Introduction

The study of dark personality is not new. Emil Kraepelin's (Kraepelin & Diefendorf, 1907) textbook detailing the nature of disturbed personalities may be the birthplace of the study of dark personality. Kraepelin described what he called the morally insane (characterized by a lack of sympathy, a tendency towards cruelty, and a lack of comprehensive reflection and foresight), the unstable (characterized by becoming rapidly interested and disinterested in activities, moodiness, and irritability), the morbid liar and swindler (characterized by high intelligence, deriving joy from successfully deceiving others, and prone to blaming others for setbacks), and the pseudoquerulants (characterized by suspiciousness, defensiveness, and litigiousness). Today, we readily recognize these types using the modern labels of psychopathic, borderline personality, Machiavellianism, and paranoia.

That said, the study of dark personality and its impact in the workplace is only just now entering into the mainstream of organizational research (see Spain, Harms, & LeBreton, 2014, and Guenole, 2014, for recent reviews). We also see dark personality research becoming prominent in books targeted at mass audiences. The popularity of books detailing the impact of narcissism (e.g. Maccoby, 2003), psychopathy (e.g. Babiak

& Hare, 2006; Dutton, 2012), or a host of other pathologies (e.g. Ghaemi, 2011) in the workplace and society in general illustrates that there is a real appetite in the public at large for understanding these potentially destructive characteristics.

The Special Issue

When we set out to put together this special issue, we specifically set out with the ambition to expand the discussion surrounding dark traits beyond the Dark Triad (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and DSM-IV Axis 2-based models (e.g. Hogan & Hogan, 2001) that have dominated the research in this area (see Schyns, 2015; Spain et al., 2014). To some degree we were successful in achieving that aim. A number of papers in the special issue expand discussion of dark personality to include feelings of entitlement (Brummel & Parker, 2015), self-enhancement (Cullen, Gentry, & Yammarino, 2015), and perfectionism (Ozbilir, Day, & Catano, 2015; Shoss, Callison, & Witt, 2015).

Our second goal was to consolidate and enhance the foundations of dark personality in the workplace. We feel that we were successful in that aim as well. Interestingly, we had four papers that provided either primary or meta-analytic evidence of the importance of dark characteristics at both the level of single traits (i.e. Narcissism; Grijalva & Newman, 2015; Maynard, Brondolo, Connelly, & Sauer, 2015) or across a broad spectrum of dark characteristics (Gaddis & Foster, 2015; Kaiser, LeBreton, & Hogan, 2015). We believe that these papers provide a solid foundation for moving the topic of dark personality in the workplace forward and we are tremendously grateful to the authors for contributing their work to the special issue. We are also thankful to the Editor of *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, Vivien Lim, for her continuing support of this effort and to Birgit Schyns for agreeing to provide a thought-provoking and thorough introduction to the special issue.

Future Directions

Defining Dark Personality

Although we believe that the papers in this special issue represent an important step forward, we cannot help but feel that the work in this area is far from complete. As noted above, research on the topic of dark personality in the context of the workplace is still relatively new and somewhat still ill-defined. We would like to spend the remaining part of this commentary detailing some of our thoughts as to where we see potential for further advancement.

One of the ongoing issues in the study of dark personality is what makes it different from other personality characteristics. There seems to be an emerging consensus that dark traits are those that lead individuals

to derail in their daily lives (both personal and work) and that are likely to emerge under periods of stress when individuals lack the cognitive resources to inhibit their impulses and motives in order to adhere to social norms and expectations (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). In particular, characteristics that reflect a motivation to elevate the self and harm others are considered particularly dark (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Importantly, dark traits are distinguished from clinical pathologies in that they do not reflect an inability to function in everyday life (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). In fact, it is believed that such characteristics may reflect specific evolutionary strategies (Jones, 2014) and that dark personality characteristics may be functional at specific levels or in particular situations (e.g. Benson & Campbell, 2007; Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, in press; Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011).

It also needs to be restated that dark personality characteristics are not simply extreme variants of normal personality traits. Although it has been noted that there are similarities between particular dark characteristics and the dimensions of the Big Five models (see Guenole, 2014), dark personality characteristics are, more often than not, composites of more elemental aspects of personality and correlations may be driven by construct overreach in Big Five measures (Harms, Spain, & Wood, 2014). Thus, any associations are likely to oversimplify or obscure the complicated relationships between the two categories of traits. A second reason for rejecting the Big Five as a foundation for understanding dark traits is that it represents an incomplete taxonomy of traits. Because evaluative terms (such as “evil” or “dangerous”) were eliminated in the early stages of the psycholexical research that led to the Big Five (cf. Allport & Odbert, 1936; Goldberg, 1981), many defining characteristics of dark personality traits are not captured within the Big Five model. For example, reanalysis (Paunonen & Jackson, 2000) of some of the foundational work by Saucier and Goldberg (1998) showed that a number of lexical clusters were “missing”, including clusters describing dark personality traits such as manipulativeness, presence or absence of ethical/moral behavior, and conceited egotism.

Measurement of Dark Personality

For these reasons and more, there have been calls for more precise measurement of dark personality traits (e.g. Spain et al., 2014). Although there has been some progress made in this regard, we would like to offer some caveats concerning the development of new dark personality measures.

The first is that efforts should be made to ensure that both construct breadth and construct specificity are maintained. What we mean by this is that measures should avoid becoming so short as to lose construct validity (see Credé, Harms, Nierhorster, & Gaye-Valentine, 2012).

Moreover, measures should be developed with the goal of ensuring that the characteristics under investigation are unique and well defined. For this reason, it is preferable to develop measures that assess more comprehensive models of dark personality than the traits in isolation. Doing so would allow researchers to avoid problems with overlapping content. Further, researchers should avoid getting trapped by models of single constructs that were developed in isolation from other dark traits.

A final issue with measurement concerns the overreliance on self-report measures for assessing dark personality. As we have argued elsewhere (see Spain et al., 2014), there is a real need for alternative measurement techniques. Some interesting alternative techniques are peer-nominations (e.g. Thomas, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2003), projective measures (e.g. Harms & Luthans, 2012; Sokolowski, Schmalt, Langens, & Puca, 2000), and conditional reasoning tests (e.g. James & LeBreton, 2010). One further technique for assessing dark characteristics concerns content coding written statements and interviews and using behavioral markers to indicate the presence of dark characteristics (e.g. Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). A related technique using personal appearance as an indicator of dark personality has shown promise as well (e.g. Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006). Most of these approaches are in their infancy and only time will tell whether or not they will prove effective for research and practice.

Establishing a More Expansive Model of Dark Traits

As mentioned above and in other articles in the special issue, there is more to dark personality than just the Dark Triad. That said, use of the Dark Triad as a framework continues to predominate in the organizational sciences (e.g. O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012).

Even so, we are seeing the beginnings of efforts to focus on other dark characteristics that may be particularly important in the workplace. Guenole (2014) has noted that the introduction of a new model of dark traits based on the DSM-5 will almost certainly start to influence research and practice. The new DSM-5 model is revolutionary in that it breaks apart widely used dimensions of personality disorders into subdimensions in order to better understand the comorbidity of different disorders and enable more effective treatment (Krueger, Eaton, Derringer, Markon, Watson, & Skodol, 2011). For example, Machiavellianism might be reconsidered as a combination of the Hostility, Suspiciousness, Callousness, Deceitfulness, and Manipulativeness dimensions. Taking this approach one step further, Harms and colleagues (2014) have suggested that dark personality might best be studied by delving deeper into the underlying psychology of the individual and identifying the motives, abilities, and perceptions (MAPs) that drive maladaptive behavior. They argue that this approach has a number of virtues including greater precision and efficiency of measurement, less obviously dark content in

measures, more subtlety in distinguishing between different types of dark personality, and that it would provide a clearer framework for providing developmental feedback.

Beyond new models of dark personality, we are seeing emergent literatures concerning specific traits, such as paranoia (e.g. Chan & McAllister, 2013), that have not received much attention in prior organizational research. Going outside the framework of dark personality traits derived from clinical constructs, we also believe that psychodynamic frameworks may provide particularly rich theoretical models for understanding dark personality in the workplace (see Harms, 2011; Kets de Vries, 2014).

Providing a Theoretical Framework

One consistent issue with publishing personality research in the organizational literature is the lack of well-developed theoretical models to guide research and practice on when dark personality characteristics should matter most and potential moderators of their effects. The general tendency by researchers in this area is to assess a dark characteristic or a set of them and then correlate them with the same types of outcomes one would expect to find in studies of bright side personality traits (e.g. O'Boyle et al., 2012). This is probably a mistake. We know from prior research that aligning personality predictors with appropriate outcomes is associated with higher estimates of predictive validity (Hogan & Holland, 2003). Haphazardly trying to predict all outcomes tends to lead to misperceptions that particular traits are less impactful than they really are. Instead, researchers should familiarise themselves with particular traits and make specific predictions based on what can be supported by prior research and theory. For example, it is well established in the narcissism literature that such individuals are fairly adept at creating positive short-term impressions, but that their constant self-aggrandizing becomes wearing over time (Grijalva & Harms, 2014; Paulhus, 1998). Consequently, it makes sense that narcissists would be expected to perform at higher levels in settings such as job interviews (Paulhus, Westlake, Calvez, & Harms, 2013) or in entrepreneurial settings where they need to sell others on their ideas (Goncalo, Flynn, & Kim, 2010).

There are some useful theoretical rules-of-thumb for predicting how dark personality characteristics should behave in general. The writings of Robert and Joyce Hogan (2001) and their colleagues have been particularly helpful in this regard. They postulate that these characteristics exist and persist because they are functional at some level or in particular circumstances. For example, the ability to think outside the box is necessary for creativity, but highly odd thoughts and behaviors can be disruptive to the workplace and even to finding practical solutions to problems. Consequently, we should expect dark traits to exhibit positive

relationships with outcomes at a particular trait level and to be associated with lower functioning or dysfunction at particularly high and low levels (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). There is accumulating evidence that this is the case (e.g. Benson & Campbell, 2007; Grijalva et al., in press). Moreover, the specific level at which optimal outcomes are found may vary by situations or cultures. For example, higher trait levels of obsessive-compulsive behaviors are likely to be better tolerated in accounting firms than in marketing firms. Likewise, unusual work contexts such as the military may provide situations where particular dark traits are positively associated with performance outcomes (see Harms et al., 2011). Similarly, certain dark traits are more likely to be viewed as destructive in particular cultural settings depending on prevailing cultural norms (see Gaddis & Foster, 2015; Grijalva & Newman, 2015). One final rule-of-thumb is that the effects of dark personality traits are most likely to be seen when individuals have the highest levels of discretion or autonomy in their workplace (Kaiser & Hogan, 2006). More specific theoretical models developed to explain the expected relationship between particular dark personality traits in specific situations may not generalize to other dark characteristics. For example, the dominance-complementarity model developed to explain the role of narcissism in leader-follower dynamics (see Grijalva & Harms, 2014) would provide poor predictions for how paranoia might influence the interpersonal dynamics and outcomes of leaders and followers.

Levels of Analysis

Although dark personality research is nearly always studied at the individual level of analysis, we know that individuals do not operate in a vacuum. In particular, if we are to understand dark personality in the workplace, then we need to understand how the effects of various traits play out at different levels of analysis. To date, there has been very little research or theory developed surrounding the issues about the interactions of individuals using similar or different pairings of dark personality traits. One exception is Grijalva and Harms' (2014) dominance-complementarity model that postulates that narcissistic leaders are best paired with non-narcissistic followers. However, we are unaware of any systematic attempt to propose interactions between different dark traits being displayed by different individuals in the workplace.

As with dyads, so it is with groups and organizations. In spite of a fairly substantial literature surrounding the personality make-up of groups (Bell, 2007), there is almost no information on how different mean levels and distributions of dark personality characteristics among team members might impact team performance. One exception to this is the work of Goncalo et al. (2010) showing that moderate levels of narcissism in teams is associated with higher levels of creativity. Clearly, there is a real need to develop a better understanding of how team dynamics are shaped

by the presence and pervasiveness of dark personality characteristics.

In terms of the strategic or firm level, there has been precious little research documenting the role of personality characteristics of corporate leaders and how it influences firm performance and even less on dark personality characteristics. The exceptions to this are historiometric studies of narcissism (e.g. Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007), but they tend to have highly inconsistent results across studies (see Grijalva et al., in press) and more research is required both to establish standards for deriving proxies for measuring personality and to expand measurement to other dark characteristics.

Other organizational scholars have attempted to anthropomorphize the firm and explain corporate behavior using traits. Famously, Bakan (2004) compared corporations to psychopaths because a corporation has an inherent concern with self-advancement, lack of guilt, willingness to test or challenge legal and social standards to improve its own position, and the ability to mimic human qualities such as empathy and altruism. Although there has been some effort to quantify the reputational character of firms (e.g. Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004), there has been no attempt to operationalize dark traits and to assess their consequences at this level. Although caution should always be used when comparing constructs across levels, we believe that research investigating dark personality at the dyadic, group, and firm levels would greatly enhance our understanding of these constructs and reinforce the importance of dark personality in organizational life.

Conclusion

In the present special issue, we set out to answer some important questions about dark personality in the workplace. But we also intended to raise questions and consciousness surrounding this important and interesting field of research. We believe that the papers included in this special issue will provide a solid theoretical and empirical foundation for further research and practice. We also hope that the questions raised will generate further interest in the topic. As we noted at the beginning of this commentary, even though this topic is not new, there is still a great deal to discover.

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