



Dominik Schwarzinger

The Dark Triad of Personality in Personnel Selection

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In loving memory of Erika Schwarzingler

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Dominik Schwarzinger



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Contents

Preface	vii
1 Introduction	1
1.2 Do We Need to Consider Dark Personality Traits in the Workplace?	3
1.3 The Structure of This Book	4
2 (Dark) Personality, Work Performance, and Professional Success	7
2.1 From Physiognomy to the Five-Factor Model and the DSM-5	7
2.1.1 “Normal” Personality and Personality Disorders	7
2.1.2 The Big Five and the Absence of Dark Factors	9
2.2 Predicting Job Performance with Personality Traits	10
2.2.1 Job Performance and Success	10
2.2.2 Professional Aptitude Diagnostics with Personality Traits	13
2.3 Dark Personality Traits as a New Approach in Personnel Psychology	15
2.3.1 A General Taxonomy of Dark Personality in DSM-5?	16
2.3.2 Defining and Delimiting the Dark Properties	18
2.3.3 Dark Personality Traits in the Workplace	22
3 The Dark Triad of Personality	26
3.1 A Short History of Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy	26
3.1.1 Narcissism	26
3.1.2 Machiavellianism	29
3.1.3 Psychopathy	31
3.2 Selected Findings of the Joint Consideration of the Characteristics	35
3.2.1 (Evolutionary) Biological Aspects	35
3.2.2 Emotional Deficits and Moral Concepts	36
3.2.3 Broad Personality Models	37
3.2.4 Cognitive Skills and Related Characteristics	38
3.2.5 Interpersonal Behavior and Lifestyle	40
3.3 Structural and Measurement-Methodological Separation of the Dark Triad	45
3.3.1 Structural Concept of the Dark Triad	46
3.3.2 Methodological Approaches to the Assessment of the Dark Triad	53
3.3.3 The Subfacets of the Dark Triad	58
4 Findings on the Dark Triad Relevant to Aptitude Diagnostics	61
4.1 Predicting Counterproductive Behavior in the Workplace	63
4.2 Predicting Job Performance and Success	67
4.2.1 Leadership Effectiveness and Abusive Supervision	67
4.2.2 Criteria of Individual Performance	70
4.2.3 Career Success	73
4.3 Further Fields of Application in Personnel Psychology	75
4.3.1 The CEO and President Personality, and Entrepreneurship	76

4.3.2	Vocational Interests and Career Orientation	78
4.3.3	Occupational Motivation, Political Skills, and Well-Being at Work	79
5	Requirements for a Diagnostic Procedure for Assessing the Dark Triad in Organizational Practice	83
5.1	Overview of the Different Measurement Approaches and Their Special Features ...	86
5.1.1	Faking Test Results	86
5.1.2	External Assessments and Information Technology-Based Measurements	89
5.1.3	Self-Assessment Procedures with Forced-Choice vs. Likert-Type Formats	93
5.2	Legal and Technical Requirements for Practical Operational Use	95
5.2.1	Legal, Subclinical Measurement of Dark Personality Traits	95
5.2.2	Technically Correct Measurement: Quality Criteria of Established Standard and Short Procedures for the Assessment of the Dark Triad	99
5.2.3	Social Validity	104
5.2.4	Occupation-Related Measurement	107
6	Work-Related Measurement of the Dark Triad – The Example of TOP	110
6.1	Design of the TOP	110
6.1.1	The Requirements, Objectives, and Database of Test Development and Item Construction	110
6.1.2	Item Analyses and Dimensionality Testing: The Structure of the TOP	113
6.2	Reliability, Validity, and Standardization	121
6.2.1	Objectivity, Reliability, and Distributional Characteristics	121
6.2.2	Construct-Related Validity: Standard Scales, Personality Models, and Relationships to Procedures and Constructs Used in Aptitude Diagnostics ..	124
6.2.3	Relationships to Integrity, Prosocial, and Counterproductive Behavior	132
6.2.4	Criterion-Related Validity: Relationships to Job Performance and Success	136
6.3	Evaluation of the TOP	147
6.3.1	Legal and Professional Requirements	147
6.3.2	Feedback of Results and Social Validity	148
6.3.3	Acceptance	149
6.3.4	Standardization	150
6.3.5	Research-Practice Effects	151
7	Recommendations for Practice and Further Research	153
7.1	Recommendations for Research	153
7.1.1	The Need for Further Theoretical Foundation and Methodological Consolidation ...	153
7.1.2	The Need for Further Practical Research and Practical Experience	155
7.2	Recommendations for Practice	158
7.2.1	Requirements and Recommendations for the Practical Application of the Dark Triad	158
7.2.2	Personnel Selection with the TOP – Possibilities and Limitations	159
7.3	Conclusion: The Dark Triad of Personality in Personnel Selection	162
	References	164
	Peer Commentaries	193

Preface

In recent years, three classics of psychology have once again gained greater scientific and, above all, public recognition – narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Under the appealing title of the “Dark Triad of Personality” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), they are increasingly being considered in many different areas, from couple psychology to management research. Just a few years have seen the compilation of an enormous breadth of knowledge about the Dark Triad. Currently, however, a growing number of critical voices are complaining that the depth and stringency of some research have been partly neglected; this hinders scientific progress, often creates misunderstandings, and may ultimately pose considerable risks, especially for applied purposes.

This book discusses the *Dark Triad of Personality in Personnel Selection*, an applied field that is not only highly regulated legally and professionally, but that, because of its significance for both individuals and organizations, also requires a special sense of proportion and quality, not at least for reasons of professional ethics. The following text addresses all relevant aspects for such an application, evaluates the current state of research, and provides practitioners with a solid basis for operative applications of the Dark Triad in the workplace.

There are many individuals and organizations without whom the present book would not have been possible; I can only honor the most important ones here. My greatest thank goes to Professor Heinz Schuler for many years of inspiration and collaboration; to the Hogrefe Publishing Group for the excellent cooperation on the present book project and the test TOP, especially Tanja Ulbricht and Sara Wellenzohn for the original German versions; to Lisa Bennett, Regina Pinks-Freybott, and Robert Dimpleby for the present English language adaptation; and, finally, to Anne Konz, on behalf of all readers, for her invaluable linguistic revisions and corrections to the manuscript.

Dominik Schwarzinger
Berlin, August 2022

1 Introduction

1.1 The Dark Triad of Personality – A Trending Topic in Organizational Psychology

The traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and subclinical psychopathy have become a big topic in psychological research since first considered together under the term Dark Triad of personality over the last two decades. We see this in the number and the breadth of content of scientific articles published on the Dark Triad. The initial work of Paulhus and Williams (2002), for example, has been cited several thousand times, and Muris et al. (2017) included almost 100 papers in their meta-analysis, each comprising all three Triad components. The vast majority of these papers have been published in recent years, thus witness to a nearly exponential increase in the number of articles (see Figure 1).

In 2019 – only 3 years after the editorial deadline of that meta-analysis and 17 years after the introduction of the Dark Triad – several hundred specific specialist publications had become available. The journal *Personality and Individual Differences* alone published more than 20 per year. A selection of the topics explored in these articles on the Triad illustrates the breadth of the burgeoning interest: number of children, intelligence, preferences for place of residence, academic misconduct, insomnia, violence in relationships, sporting activity, behavior in social media.

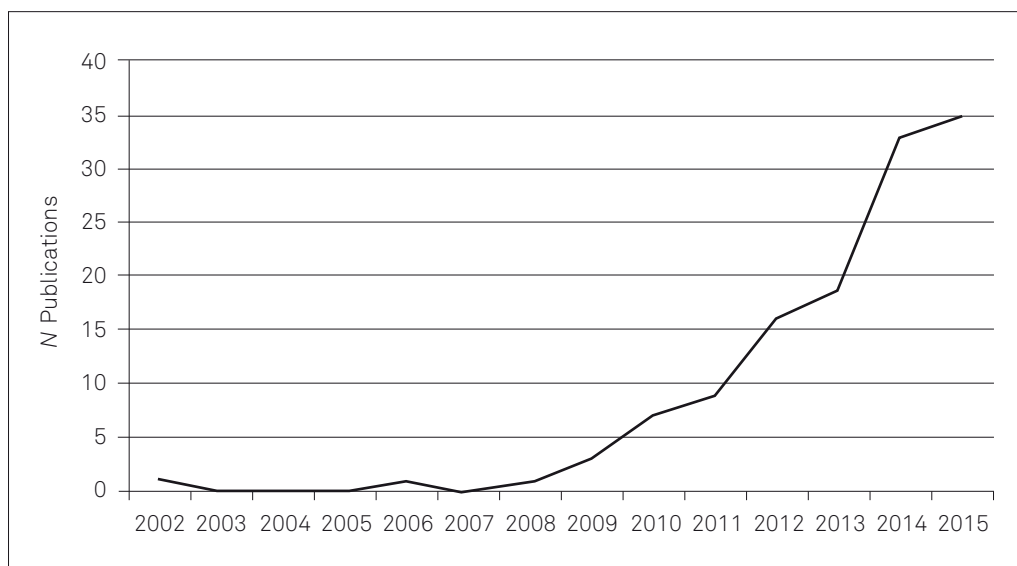


Figure 1. Publications on the Dark Triad since the creation of the term, based on a web-of-science search. Reprinted with permission from “The malevolent side of human nature: A meta-analysis and critical review of the literature on the Dark Triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy),” by P. Muris, H. Merckelbach, H. Otgaar, & E. Meijer (2017), *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12, 185. © 2017 Sage.

The trend extends so far that several publications now contain considerable criticism (e.g., Adam, 2019; Miller et al., 2019). This criticism is leveled not so much toward the concept of the Dark Triad itself as toward how studies are conducted, such as the theoretical foundations and the measurement methods used – but above all toward how the multitude of findings was not cumulatively studied and integrated. In other words, these questions concern some of the very principles of serious scientific research. We can understand this criticism as being directed at both those undertaking the research and at the system that has generated and permitted an excessive number of such uncritically verified publications, all of which contributed to the current, partially confused state of the research on the Dark Triad.

This situation is something that occurs from time to time in various scientific fields, which the scientific community concerned is in the process of trying to rectify, and as a result is perhaps not such a serious matter. A comparatively greater problem, however, is that, before the above-mentioned corrections and without recourse to the admonitions of the relevant experts, the Dark Triad has also attracted overwhelming interest in disciplines related to psychology, such as business management and human resources research but above all in the popular scientific and general press. This interest has arisen primarily because of the impact the Dark Triad has on the working world, a research focus that has recently become increasingly important (e.g., Cohen, 2016; O’Boyle et al., 2012; Spain et al., 2014; Wille et al., 2013). The results of this research are readily adopted outside academia, in particular in online media of all types and quality, but also in the career sections of major daily and weekly newspapers. Indeed, there has been real hype about the impact of these features in professional life.

For example, we read articles with titles such as “The Dark Triad – Why Radically Ruthless People Get Ahead” which discuss narcissists and psychopaths in top management positions. The popular debate thus emphasizes the enhanced values of the Dark Triad as partly conducive to professional success, especially in leadership positions, whereas, according to the definition of the characteristics and the traditional colloquial use of the terms, they are primarily and predominantly associated with *negative* consequences for third parties. A fact that has been well proven empirically in the last few years.

Based on the previous scientific findings (or the media coverage?), it cannot surprise that employers would like to “detect, remove, punish, [or] retrain employees with these characteristics” (Jonason et al., 2014, p. 122). For the characteristic of psychopathy, there have been several calls for the use of screening measures to keep dangerous persons away from certain positions (Skeem et al., 2011). Several relevant authors explicitly refer to possible aptitude-diagnostic use, namely, personnel selection based on the Dark Triad (e.g., O’Boyle et al., 2012; Schyns, 2015; Wu & LeBreton, 2011) – which has now turned it an object of recent personnel psychology research.

Further research into the effects of the Dark Triad in the workplace is urgently needed if it is to be used not only for the accumulation of scientific knowledge and for public discussion, but also in everyday human resources work. To justify the actual operative use of the Dark Triad traits as a basis for personnel decisions, one must first be able to reliably predict criteria relevant to this purpose – and here the findings are far less clear than public reception would suggest. Luckily, based on data stemming from companies and professionals, there is now enough high-quality empirical work available to allow statements about the extent to which the use of the Dark Triad may be beneficial in personnel work – and for which purposes.

However, the applied use of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy in aptitude diagnostics generates several potential problems, ranging from ethical considerations and professional-legal guidelines, to still unclarified theoretical issues and the basic psychometric demands on the standard test procedures used for this purpose. In contrast to the criteria relationships that have so far been the subject of most research, these questions are still largely unresolved, primarily because Triad research was not oriented toward work and organization from the beginning, and because a broader occupation with this matter has taken place only in the last 10 years. Above all, however, we have little experience in the organizational context concerning how the Dark Triad can be applied successfully in practical personnel work, what reactions it provokes, and how valuable the results obtained really are. This book makes initial contributions to this and examines whether the hype about the Dark Triad of personality is justified from a personnel-psychological point of view.

1.2 Do We Need to Consider Dark Personality Traits in the Workplace?

The present focus on dark personality traits in work and organizational psychology arose mostly from the desire to identify features responsible for employees or executives “derailing” their careers – a risk some authors perceive for more than half of all managers (Dalal & Nolan, 2009). Based on expert estimates, Simonet et al. (2018) assume that the cost of a single “derailed” executive can run into the millions, making them costly and as we will see, also common.

In De Fruyt et al. (2013), 20% of the managers tested had a potential personality disorder. The authors make clear that every HR manager should deal with this issue, since 15% of the population (here: USA) display at least one personality disorder or its symptoms during their lifetime: Every HR manager thus inevitably encounters affected employees. This also demonstrates that the problem affects not only managers or employees from the higher hierarchical levels of an organization; on the contrary, the “dark side” of a person’s personality (especially if one includes not only clinical disorders but also their much more widespread subclinical forms) is one of the main factors influencing deviant behavior at all levels and in all sectors of the economy (see Sections 2.2 and 4.1).

Although the study of dark personality traits is certainly relevant and not new, only in recent years has it attracted widespread interest in industrial and organizational psychology and management sciences (Harms & Spain, 2015). This even led to two special journal issues on the subject of dark personalities in the workplace (Murphy, 2014; Stephan, 2015). These show that a wide variety of mental disorders and more harmless abnormalities – and even excessive manifestations of actually positive characteristics, such as perfectionism – are usually negatively associated with job performance (e.g., McCord et al., 2014). Other studies also discuss the positive effects of dark characteristics, although these are not unequivocally the case and do not apply in the same way to all characteristics and occupations (e.g., Gaddis & Foster, 2015).