

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



Barbara Wisse^{a,b,*}, Ed Sleebos^c

^a University of Groningen, The Netherlands

^b Durham University, England

^c VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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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'

* Corresponding author at: University of Groningen, Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Grote Kruisstraat 2/1, 9712 TS Groningen, The Netherlands.

E-mail address: b.m.wisse@rug.nl (B. Wisse).

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

their subordinates. All 225 approached supervisors completed our hard copy questionnaire (100% response rate). Fifty-six percent of the supervisors were men, their mean age was 39.18 years ($SD = 11.76$), and their average tenure in the team was 5.53 years ($SD = 6.70$). Supervisors indicated to have on average 5.7 subordinates (ranging from 2 to 23) and out of the total of 1284 approached subordinates, 740 subordinates (312 men, 428 women) completed the hard copy questionnaire (58% response rate). Their average age was 32.84 years ($SD = 12.54$). All teams had an intra-team response-rate of 50% or higher.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Dark Triad

To measure the Dark Triad traits, supervisors completed a Dutch translation (Wisse et al., 2015) of the 12-item 'Dirty Dozen' scale (Jonason and Webster, 2010). This short measure has been shown to have satisfactory construct validity and sound structural properties (Webster and Jonason, 2013). Supervisors indicated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements assessing Machiavellianism ($\alpha = 0.79$; e.g., "I have used deceit or lied to get my way"), psychopathy ($\alpha = 0.65$; e.g., "I tend to lack remorse"), and narcissism ($\alpha = 0.81$; e.g., "I tend to want others to admire me").

2.2.2. Perceived position power

We developed a 7-item scale assessing the amount of control supervisors perceived to have over valued resources. The scale reflected supervisor perceptions of their position power in the team as a whole (instead of their position power over specific subordinates; cf. Yukl and Falbe, 1991). Supervisors indicated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with the following statements: "I have the authority to fire my subordinates", "My position at work gives me formal power", "I have the authority to give my subordinates a promotion", "I have the authority to hire new people", "I take part in all the important advisory boards/committees", "My position at work gives me formal authority", and "I control the resources of my subordinates". Cronbach's alpha was 0.86.¹

2.2.3. Abusive supervision

We slightly adapted Tepper's scale (Tepper, 2000) of abusive supervision to measure abusive supervision as consistent behavior towards all subordinates within the team. Subordinates indicated how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as "Our supervisor ridicules us" (15 items, $\alpha = 0.94$).

2.2.4. Controls

We controlled for supervisor age (Barlett and Barlett, 2015) and gender (Webster and Jonason, 2013), because previous research has found these variables to correlate with the Dark Triad traits. Additionally, we controlled for supervisor's team tenure because research suggests that others' perceptions of people scoring high on Dark Triad traits may change once they get to know them better (Campbell and Campbell, 2009). Team size and team response rate did not significantly correlate with our study variables and were therefore not considered for further analysis.

2.2.5. Procedure

Data were collected as part of a study on "21st century leadership". Research assistants used their work environment, personal network and the networks of acquaintances to contact supervisors and their teams. Potential participants were approached via email, phone calls, or face-to-face contact. Research assistants stressed that participation was voluntary and that data would be treated confidentially. If

supervisors and their subordinates were interested in participating, they were asked to complete the paper-and-pencil questionnaires without consulting others. To increase the confidentiality of the data collection, questionnaires were handed out personally and personal appointments were made to collect the questionnaires. Because people often filled out the questionnaires during work hours, we kept the survey short and to the point.

3. Results

3.1. Measurement analyses

All subordinates provided ratings of team level abusive supervision. To justify aggregation of this measure empirically, we calculated $r_{wg}(j)$ scores, the ICC(1), and the ICC2(2) of abusive supervision (Bliese and Halverson, 1998; James et al., 1993). In all (but one) teams $r_{wg}(j)$ scores exceeded the generally accepted 0.70 cut-off value ($0.79 \leq r_{wg}(j) \leq 1.00$), and was on average 0.98 ($SD = 0.07$). Because the data from the one team in which (the two) subordinates agreed less with one another did not affect the pattern of results, we decided to keep this team in the dataset. The ICC(1) was 0.24 ($F(1,224) = 2.05, p \leq 0.01$), and the ICC(2) was 0.54 which are both satisfactory. To test for non-response bias, we correlated the intra-team response-rate with subordinate rated abusive supervision (Timmerman, 2005). The correlation was non-significant ($r = -0.10, n.s.$), suggesting that bias resulting from intra-team nonresponse was not an issue.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis supported the distinctiveness of our supervisor and team-level constructs: narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, perceived position power, and abusive supervision. We used ML Robust to correct for substantial multivariate kurtosis (Mardia's coefficient = 195.02, normalized estimate = 29.36). The CFA yielded acceptable fit indexes ($\chi^2 = 940.96, df = 517, p \leq 0.001, \chi^2 / df = 1.82, CFI = 0.84; RMSEA = 0.061$). Alternative models did not provide a better fit to the data.

3.2. Correlations

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the study variables are displayed in Table 1. Results showed that the higher supervisors' age, the lower were their scores on the Dark Triad traits. Moreover, the higher supervisors scored on the Dark Triad traits, the shorter was their team supervisory tenure. Confirming previous findings, we found significant positive correlations between supervisor psychopathy and Machiavellianism on the one hand and abusive supervision as rated by the subordinates on the other hand (Kiazid et al., 2010; Laurijssen et al., 2016). All correlations between the Dark Triad traits were moderately high.

3.3. Hypotheses testing

We performed regression analyses with the three supervisor Dark Triad traits, perceived position power, and the interactions between the three traits and perceived position power as predictors, and abusive supervision of the team members as the dependent variable. We controlled for supervisor gender, age, and team tenure. All variables were standardized and interaction terms were based on standardized scores. Our analysis yielded a main effect of Machiavellianism, a marginally significant main effect of psychopathy and no main effect of supervisor narcissism (see Table 2). This indicated that particularly supervisors scoring high on Machiavellianism were perceived as displaying more abusive supervision. In addition, and in line with our hypothesis, we found that the interaction term of supervisor Machiavellianism and perceived position power predicted abusive supervision (see Fig. 1). Simple slopes analyses (at 1 SD above and below the mean) showed that supervisor Machiavellianism was associated with higher ratings of abusive supervision when supervisors indicated to have high position power

¹ An exploratory factor analysis (Oblimin rotation) of the position power items showed that a one-factor solution accounted for 54% of variance and item loadings were between 0.63 and 0.83. The convergent validity was good ($AVE = 0.54$).

Table 1
Descriptives and correlations for the study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Supervisor rated</i>									
1. Gender	–	–	–						
2. Age	39.18	11.76	–0.19**	–					
3. Tenure team	9.13	8.50	–0.11	0.49**	–				
4. Narcissism	3.25	1.21	0.01	–0.23**	–0.12†	–			
5. Psychopathy	2.82	1.09	–0.06	–0.26**	–0.13*	0.39**	–		
6. Machiavellianism	2.17	1.07	–0.04	–0.17*	–0.11†	0.52**	0.45**	–	
7. Perceived position power	3.41	0.95	–0.04	0.10	0.14*	0.15*	0.10	0.21*	–
<i>Subordinate rated</i>									
8. Abusive supervision	1.47	0.41	–0.22**	0.11†	0.27**	0.12†	0.19**	0.30**	0.18*

N = 225 (listwise).

† *p* < 0.10.

* *p* < 0.05.

** *p* < .01.

($\beta = 0.15$, 95% BCa CI = [0.08, 0.23]), but not when supervisors indicated to have low position power ($\beta = 0.02$, 95% BCa CI = [–0.09, 0.12]).

4. Discussion

This study focused on supervisor Dark Triad personality traits, supervisor position power and employee perceptions of abusive supervision in their team. Using convenience sampling we were able to collect multi-source data from 225 teams, spanning a diverse set of organizations. The results support and extend previous studies in several ways. Firstly, as did Kiazid et al. (2010), we found a positive relationship between supervisor Machiavellianism and employee ratings of abusive supervision. Secondly, we found that this relationship was stronger when supervisors perceived themselves to have more position power. Thirdly, we found that supervisor narcissism and psychopathy were not significantly related to abusive supervision in the team. These findings thus testify to the importance of differentiating between the Dark Triad personality traits (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). Although we did not expect narcissism to be related to abusive supervision per se, we did expect psychopathy, just like Machiavellianism, to be related to it, particularly in case of high position power. One factor that may explain the differential findings between Machiavellianism and psychopathy, is that Machiavellianism has a substantial shared environment component whereas psychopathy can largely be explained by genetic and non-shared environmental factors (Vernon et al., 2008). This suggests that Machiavellians may have adjusted to their environment more and may have acquired their Machiavellianism over time, while psychopaths are less adaptable (Jones and Paulhus, 2010). Machiavellians,

therefore, may be more sensitive to external cues than psychopaths. Another reason that may explain the lack of findings for psychopathy may be found in our use of the Dirty Dozen scale (Jonason and Webster, 2010). We used this short scale because most participants filled out the questionnaire at work, which posed time constraints regarding their participation. However, the measure is sometimes criticized, specifically where the measurement of psychopathy is concerned. It has been argued that the psychopathy subscale fails to capture disinhibition and interpersonal antagonism (Miller et al., 2012). These aspects of psychopathy may be particularly important with respect to abusive leadership. As such, the current study should be replicated with other Dark Triad scales (such as NPI, MACH-IV, LSRPA) to investigate whether more pronounced effects could be found for psychopathy.

A potential limitation is that our study was conducted in the Netherlands: a country with a rather low power distance (the acceptance of and the expectation that power is distributed unequally; Hofstede, 2010). It has been suggested that, in countries with a relatively low power distance, an abusive person is perceived negatively regardless of her or his power position, whereas in high power distance countries, the behavior of a high power individual is judged less harshly than that of a low power individual (Bond et al., 1985). Perhaps in high power distance cultures the idea that one can ‘get away’ with mistreatment may stimulate powerful supervisors who score high on the Dark Triad to engage in abusive supervision more (Pilch and Turska, 2015). Similarly, the prospect of potentially losing power may weaken the relationship between the Dark Triad and abusive supervision. Future research may focus on if and how culture and fear of losing power may affect the integrative effect of Dark Triad personality traits and power on abusive supervision.

Table 2
Multiple regression results for subordinate rated abusive supervision.

Variable	95% confidence interval			
	β	s.e.	Lower	Upper
Constant	1.45**	0.02	1.404	1.492
Gender	–0.07**	0.02	–0.115	–0.021
Age	–0.00	0.03	–0.058	0.051
Team tenure	0.11**	0.04	0.036	0.174
Supervisor narcissism	–0.02	0.03	–0.084	0.043
Supervisor psychopathy	0.05†	0.03	–0.005	0.108
Supervisor Machiavellianism	0.09**	0.03	0.030	0.141
Perceived position power	0.03	0.02	–0.015	0.078
Supervisor narcissism × perceived position power	–0.00	0.04	–0.075	0.083
Supervisor psychopathy × perceived position power	–0.04	0.03	–0.100	0.032
Supervisor Machiavellianism × perceived position power	0.07*	0.03	0.002	0.129

N = 225 (listwise).

† *p* < 0.10.

* *p* < 0.05.

** *p* < 0.01.

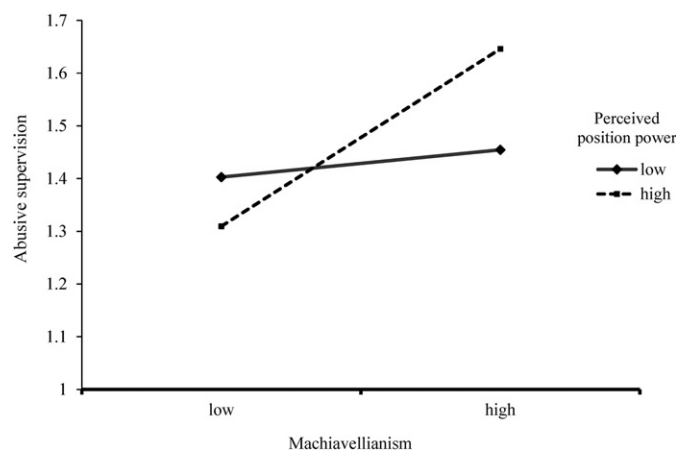


Fig. 1. Subordinate rated abusive supervision as a function of supervisor rated Machiavellianism and perceived position power.

Abusive supervision can generate a wide variety of negative consequences for subordinates as well as for the organization at large. More insight into the conditions that prompt supervisors to engage in this destructive behavior towards subordinates is therefore essential. We found that organizations may want to be cautious when hiring (or promoting) highly Machiavellian supervisors into positions that grant them more power. We hope that our study stimulates research that employs an interactionist perspective (integrating both person and situational characteristics) on the influence of Dark Triad traits at work. This may further insight into how organizations can protect themselves against the destructive influences of supervisors with Dark Triad traits.

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