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Paper title:

Leadership and the Dark Triad: how uncertainty explains why dark employees rise to the top

Abstract:

Why is it often the case that individuals with Dark Triad (DT) traits—i.e., psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism—are over-represented in the upper echelons of corporations? We propose a two-fold explanation for this. Central to both of these explanations is the role of uncertainty about one's self that poses a threat to the self-concept—i.e., self-uncertainty (Hogg, 2007). We argue that individuals high on the DT are more likely to seek out leadership positions, particularly when their sense of self is threatened; and that followers are more likely to find certain traits associated with the DT personality desirable in their leaders - here also when their sense of self is threatened.

In the first part of this project, Experiments 1 and 2 document a curvilinear effect of the DT on motivation to lead, moderated by self-uncertainty. That is, we find that individuals who score highest on the DT show increased motivation to lead when their sense of self is threatened. Experiment 3 demonstrates that this effect is mediated via enhanced hostility. Finally, Experiment 4 shows that reflecting on positive memories of their daily lives is a key to cooling down the hostility individuals high on the DT feel when they are uncertain.

In the second part of this project, we examine how leaders' DT personalities become more acceptable when their followers feel uncertain. Two preliminary studies (Experiments 5 and 6) provided support to this prediction.

To conclude, in this paper we seek to understand why possessing personal attributes that are generally perceived as negative far from harming individuals' careers can increase their social magnetism and the chances they have to reach influential positions in our society. Understanding how and why destructive or abusive individuals get ahead and emerge as leaders has great relevance in the current corporate and political domains.