

BRENDAN COLEMAN & VICTOR DULEWICZ



The
**DARK
TRIAD**

*Psychopaths, Narcissists and
Machiavellians in the Workplace*

THE DARK TRIAD

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THE DARK TRIAD: PSYCHOPATHS, NARCISSISTS AND MACHIAVELLIANS IN THE WORKPLACE

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

This book introduces us to the disturbing and frightening world of the ‘Dark Triad’ – psychopaths, narcissists and Machiavellians – and describes how these potentially dangerous and aversive personalities infiltrate our workplaces. During a long career in public service, particularly as a prison governor and regulator for several health bodies, I have witnessed first-hand the impact of Dark Triad personality traits.

The authors of this book have also encountered these sinister personalities up close and personal. Their purpose is not merely to present their findings but to equip you the reader with the tools required to identify, confront and mitigate their pernicious influence. Through a fusion of meticulous research and vivid, real-world anecdotes, they successfully illuminate the shadows cast by these complex personalities, offering both clarity and actionable insights for individuals and organisations alike.

For those who have endured the schemes of a devious colleague or the egotism of a self-anointed leader, this is your roadmap to understanding why such behaviours emerge, how they wreak havoc and, most importantly, how to identify and counteract them.

Far more than a cautionary tale, this book arms readers with the tools to recognise and manage these destructive personalities, shedding light on how doing so can foster healthier, more productive workplace dynamics. The Dark Triad is not just an academic curiosity; it is a pressing concern for HR professionals, managers, psychologists and anyone interested in safeguarding organisational well-being as well as themselves personally. Its impact ripples beyond the office, making it a matter of relevance for society at

large. If you have ever wondered how charm turns to manipulation, ambition to ruthlessness and confidence to entitlement, this book offers the answers and the antidotes.

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INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

Over 20 years ago, Paulhus and Williams coined the term ‘Dark Triad’ (DT) which refers to three socially aversive personality traits, psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism. This first chapter provides a brief description of the three DT personalities before outlining the implications for management, in terms of managing the consequences of their presence in their organisation. Finally, it presents a brief description of the other seven chapters in the book.

Keywords: Dark Triad; psychopathy; narcissism; Machiavellianism; toxic culture; dark personality

BACKGROUND TO THE DT

The sinister concept of the DT is a term that elegantly captures the more malevolent tendencies of human personality *psychopathy*, *narcissism* and *Machiavellianism*. These are not the deranged outliers of society, the ones in straight-jackets or courtrooms – for the most part, they are the polished, day-to-day tyrants who blend in seamlessly, wreaking quiet havoc in boardrooms, organisations, educational settings and social circles.

What they share, at their core, is a breathtaking indifference to others, an everyday callousness that's chillingly functional. They don't just survive in society; they *flourish!*

These characters, while not extreme enough to warrant the attention of mental health professionals or forensic investigators, often excel at operating in the more ordinary walks of life. Their secret? They tend to fly just below the radar, perfectly capable of playing by the rules when it suits them, all the while chiselling away at the integrity of those around them. And yet, these are not the psychopaths you will see in TV or film dramas, but the ones who'll smile at you during a meeting, all the while plotting your downfall with Machiavellian precision. It's a stark reminder that malevolence doesn't always wear the mask of the grotesque – it often meets us appearing perfectly normal – donning the mask of sanity.

Psychopathy is the uninhibited pursuit of thrills, marked by impulsivity, aggression and a general disregard for human decency. This disinhibition leads to behaviours defined by *meanness* and a striking *absence of empathy, guilt or conscience*. It's a character profile that manages to combine *charm* with *moral bankruptcy*, all neatly packaged in a total absence of anxiety and with a *cold, callous disregard* for others. While narcissists carefully manage their image and Machiavellians plot with strategic precision, psychopaths tend to display their aggression without restraint, taking pleasure in others' suffering – whether observed or not. Recent developments in non-clinical psychopathy measurement have brought these traits into sharper focus for research.

Narcissism is that blinding cocktail of *grandiosity* and self-obsession that thrives on attention and admiration, as if it were oxygen. Unlike the Machiavellian and the psychopath, who couldn't care less about social graces, narcissists are keenly attuned to how they are perceived – hungry for validation and driven by a need to impress. This obsession with status manifests in *hyper-competitiveness, dominance* and a staggering *sense of entitlement*. Yet, this inflated self-image is not as bulletproof as it appears. Beneath the brash exterior lies a core of *vulnerability, hypersensitive to criticism* and *defensive* to a fault. Narcissists

oscillate between admiration-seeking and rivalry, craving approval but quick to lash out when threatened. Ultimately, this fragile ego often breeds *paranoia* and amoral behaviour, leaving empathy by the wayside.

Machiavellianism is the art of manipulation with *power* as the prize. Those who embody it see others not as equals but as tools – mere stepping stones towards their own self-serving goals. Their methods are *cold*, *calculating* and *ruthlessly strategic*, driven by a singular intent: to gain and *hold power*, often through *unethical* and *reckless* behaviour. Unlike narcissists, who seek power as a vehicle for admiration, Machiavellians are interested in power for its own sake – *detached*, *pragmatic* and *devoid of moral concerns*. Their game is one of *control*, not applause.

Though distinct, the DT traits overlap particularly in their exploitation of others, ethical lapses and an overarching *self-centeredness*. The key traits of each DT personality are shown in Fig. 1.1. Research shows a high degree of interconnection between these traits, all sharing a foundation of *low agreeableness* and *moral deficiency*. While each trait may manifest differently, they collectively represent a dark departure from social and ethical norms.

Of course, one must concede that these traits when tempered with moderation can offer a tactical advantage. A little Machiavellian cunning, for example, can win wars – whether in business or politics. Narcissism can fuel ambition and drive though one must tread carefully lest it spiral into a megalomaniacal delusion. The real trick lies in keeping these traits on a leash, channelled into something constructive rather than outright destructive.

Understanding the DT offers a glimpse into the darker corners of human nature – a disquieting, yet essential, exercise if we are to defend ourselves against their manipulations. Recognising these traits, both in others and ourselves, may just help us navigate a world where ambition too often comes at the expense of ethics, and charm is but a mask for manipulation. In recent years, the DT has enjoyed something of a cultural renaissance. Merely mentioning the term in a presentation or casual discussion is guaranteed to provoke a mixture of curiosity and unease, as the audience eagerly

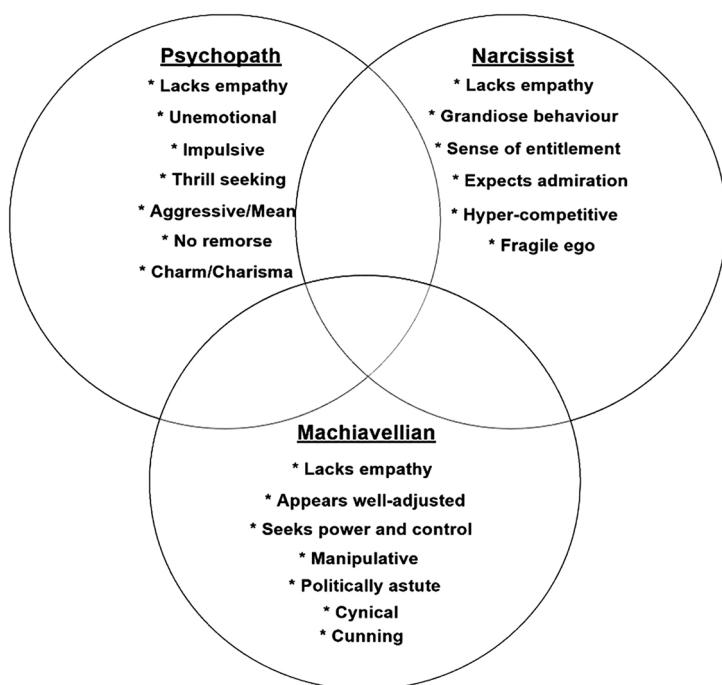


Fig. 1.1. The DT with Key Traits.

leans in, hoping to better understand the malevolent trifecta that governs much of human misbehaviour: *psychopathy*, *narcissism* and *Machiavellianism*.

A simple Google search on ‘Dark Triad’ yields nearly 4 million results, spanning everything from Hitchcock’s *Psycho* to step-by-step guides on how to spot a DT personality lurking in your office or even one’s own social circle. The widespread fascination is not just academic; many who clamour for more information on the subject have, quite tragically, already encountered these charming yet malignant figures in their own lives, often in the workplace, where these traits seem to thrive like mould in damp corners.

Indeed, it’s no coincidence that this topic resonates so deeply. There will be those of us, who have at one time or another, fallen victim to a Machiavellian manipulator, a narcissistic blowhard or a cold-blooded psychopath who seemed to delight in pulling strings for their own amusement. Now, thanks to the DT’s surge in

popularity, we have the language – and the research – to identify these individuals who seem to haunt our professional and personal lives with impunity.

WHY WE WROTE THE BOOK

The DT is not just some dry, abstract concept from a colourless psychology textbook. The authors have encountered these individuals first hand in both personal and professional contexts. For the first author, it triggered a quest to find out more, resulting in doctoral thesis by research, the outcomes of which formed the basis for this book. The motivation is not just to share what we've learned but also to equip others with knowledge and tools that can help them navigate and protect themselves in environments where DT traits are prevalent. By bringing together research and real-world examples, we hope to shed light on these often-misunderstood behaviours and offer practical insights for individuals and organisations alike.

Why You Should Read the Book

We have all encountered people who seem cunning, manipulative or overly self-centred. This book shines a spotlight on how psychopaths, Machiavellians and narcissists can undermine organisational health and degrade job and organisational performance. For anyone who has ever felt uneasy about a manipulative colleague or a self-obsessed leader, we provide insight into why and how such behaviour happens and what the consequences might be for teams and organisations if left unchecked. It helps the reader understand how to spot these aversive and objectionable personalities, and why understanding them is key to fostering improved workplace dynamics and individual well-being. The presence of the DT is an area of research that seems to intrigue occupational, organisational, clinical and forensic psychologists alike, as well members of the public, HR practitioners and line managers. Therefore, it has important implications for society as a whole.

The media too has in recent years shown an interest. For example, there has been much speculation as to which DT personality applies to leading politicians and leaders such as Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. With the rise of social media and 24/7 news coverage, the behaviours of public figures – be they business leaders, politicians or sports stars – are under constant scrutiny. Every action is observed, dissected and debated in real-time on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and TikTok, offering us daily, sometimes hourly, insights into leadership styles and characteristics.

A stark example of this heightened visibility was the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly how leadership responded to the crisis. In the UK, the USA and other countries, citizens closely followed news briefings, looking to political leaders for guidance in an unprecedented situation. Restrictions were imposed on daily life, from limited outdoor exercise to isolation from loved ones. During this time, the actions of leaders were magnified under the public lens, and over time, anger and resentment have grown regarding how the crisis was handled. People questioned whether leaders were transparent or manipulative, truthful or deceitful. Did they put the public's welfare first, or did they act to protect their own reputations?

Although this book does not specifically examine the COVID-19 crisis, it delves into the leadership traits that fuel such widespread distrust, anger and resentment. Whether you have faced toxic leadership first-hand or witnessed it from afar, the emotional toll is undeniable. In this book, we explore the science behind leadership behaviour, lifting the veil on why some leaders seem to lack empathy and compassion.

As authors we have spent our careers studying human behaviour, with the second author investigating the links between intellectual ability (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ) and leadership. In this book, we introduce the DT – Psychopathy, Narcissism and Machiavellianism – traits that often underpin destructive leadership.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

Management should be interested in the DT because staff with higher levels of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy tend to

have lower ratings of job performance. Furthermore, research has shown links between many counterproductive or toxic workplace behaviours and the DT, such as bullying, shouting, arrogance, public criticism, belittling, manipulation, intimidation and coercion. Narcissism and Machiavellianism have been linked to unethical behaviour in CEOs. Psychopaths in business (the corporate psychopath) exhibit diminished levels of responsibility which can negatively impact productivity. Machiavellianism is strongly linked with diminished organisational, supervisor and team commitment and is often related to abusive behaviour towards subordinates, maintaining power through manipulation. These behaviours have variously been described as ‘petty tyranny’ and ‘abusive supervision’ which inevitably reduce the job satisfaction and quality of life for those on the receiving end as it tends to spill over into their lives away from work, resulting in rising absenteeism, lost productivity increased managerial costs and even mental breakdown. The consequences of employing managers and staff with DT traits also include unethical behaviour, financial fraud, increased workplace conflict, increased staff turnover rates, employee disengagement and damage to the organisation’s reputation.

Because of the ‘costs’ just mentioned, this book will cover proposed management actions for staff selection, identification of potential, appraisal and development. It will include ways of spotting the behaviours of the DT types, which are the tell-tale signs and indicators of psychopaths, narcissists and Machiavellians. Once done, this could provide relevant material for any behavioural/competency-based staff selection and appraisal system. A highly effective way of identifying DT traits is a 360-degree appraisal system as it can capture the experiences of those on the receiving end. Another effective approach is a ‘whistle-blowing’ policy to deal with any problems arising.

Methods for assessing DT traits will be described. For example, the use of separate psychometric scales for Psychopaths (B Scan 360), Narcissists (NPI) and Machiavellians (Mach IV). The alternative is to derive DT scores from *one* personality instrument, the Hogan Development Survey. The formulae for doing this, based on research, and advice on implementation will be provided.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

This book draws upon an extensive literature, especially research papers, which include the author's own contributions as well as other sources. The text unfolds over eight informative, intriguing chapters, each peeling back the layers of the DT to reveal what really drives and motivates these personalities and examines their impact on those unfortunate enough to work alongside them. *Chapters 2–4* plunge into the distinct worlds of the psychopath, the narcissist and the Machiavellian, tracing the origins and evolution to their modern-day incarnations. The reader will encounter real-world examples of these individuals in action and see how they manifest in typical workplace behaviours that can turn an ordinary job into daily jeopardy. Each chapter is brought to life with a vivid real-life case study, showing the consequences of these traits when left unchecked. If that's not enough, we showcase these darker personalities through case studies of notorious public figures and infamous fictional characters who illustrate the seductive appeal and devastating impact of the DT. We selected the case studies of these public figures based on the public statements of academics, psychologists, psychiatrists, journalists and commentators, many of whom we have cited within the book.

Expect a journey through psychological landscapes that are anything but ordinary, filled with power plays, manipulation and the quiet ruthlessness and treachery that defines life at the darker end of the personality spectrum.

In *Chapter 5*, we venture into the realm of measurement of the DT. We begin with the on-going debate between the 'lumpers and splitters'. Are the DT traits best understood as distinct entities or as a single entity? The discussion is not merely academic hair-splitting, but it goes to the very heart of how we identify, understand and address these personalities.

We then examine the tools at our disposal – three distinct scales designed to assess the DT. Following this, we explore how these dark tendencies relate to the more agreeable traits measured by the 'Big 5' personality factors, often used to chart the 'brighter side' of personality.

The chapter continues with an appraisal of the Hogan Development Survey (HDS), a well-regarded instrument for measuring these darker aspects through a single, cohesive test. Finally, we offer practical guidance for computing DT scores based on our