Research Article

Examining Dark Personality Traits and Leader-Member Relationships

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Abstract

In recent years, the intersection between personality and industrial/organizational psychology has highlighted the impact of personality traits on leader-follower relationships. Research examining the impact of overlapping follower-leader personality traits on the development of high-quality leader-member relationships has focused exclusively on Big Five measurements of personality; however, little has been studied about whether dark personality traits (i.e., dark triad) play a role in creating a high-quality leader-follower relationship, hence the aim of this study. The purpose of this study was to determine whether leader and follower dark triad personality traits can impact the quality of the leader-member exchange. Findings suggest that leader and follower dark triad traits do account for some of the variability in the quality of leader-member relationships, with some traits being more predictive than others. Further implications and directions are discussed.

Keywords: Leadership; Managers; Dark leadership; Leader–member exchange; Dark triad; Personality

Introduction

Much of our understanding of dark leadership is based on the relationship between leaders and followers [1]. Several studies have defined dark leader traits and behaviors solely from the perspective of the follower [2-5], but what a follower deems destructive could differ based on the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Lyons and colleagues [6], found followers who had high-quality relationships with their leader perceived the leader's destructive traits and behaviors as less abusive; however, how a destructive leader and their follower(s) initially create a high-quality relationship is unclear. While studies have confirmed the Big Five personality traits play a role in creating high-quality leader-mem ber exchanges [7], little has been studied about whether dark personality traits play a role in creating the leader-follower relationship. Using a survey questionnaire consisting of the Short Dark Triad (SD3) and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX-7) instruments, this study sought to determine whether leader and follower Dark Triad (DT) personality traits could predict the quality of the leader-follower relationship, and whether dark traits have a significant impact on the quality of the leader-member exchange.

Literature Review

According to Padilla and colleagues [8], dark leaders typically have high levels of charisma and narcissism, use their power

for personal gain, and hold ideologies of hate. These characteristics align closely with the Dark Triad of Personality (DT), through which people display the high-order personality constructs of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy [9,10]. Machiavellianism involves using amoral manipulation to pursue one's own goals, through lying or exploiting others [11]. Further, those who exhibit Machiavellianism often lack empathy for and distrust others, making it difficult for them to develop high-quality relationships with other individuals [11,12]. Narcissism refers to individual features of exploitive behavior, a grandiose view of self, callousness, and an excessive need for attention and admiration [11]. Finally, psychopathy involves traits of superficial charm, grandiosity, lack of empathy/remorse, and counterproductive behaviors such as irresponsibility or impulsivity [13]. These dark personality traits, often referred to as the "dark triad," are considered an integral factor contributing to dark leadership behavior [14-17].

Regardless of these dark traits, many still choose to follow dark leaders for various reasons. For example, people may follow dark leaders out of need, while others may follow the leader in order to get ahead [8]. Fear is another substantial contributor, as those who follow out of fear (i.e., conformers) do so with the hope of having unmet basic needs fulfilled by the leader, have an external locus of control, and/or low psychological maturity. On the contrary, those who follow to get ahead (i.e., colluders) typically have high ambitions that they believe the leader can help them achieve, and/or their values and beliefs align with that of their leaders [8]. This parallel alliance of characteristics between the leader and follower is a potential example of how high-quality leader-member exchanges are created.

Leader-Member Exchange

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory seeks to measure the quality of a relationship between a leader and their follower(s) [18]. The development of LMX has roots in Vertical Dyadic Linkage Theory (VDL), which proposed differentiating relationships between managers and their direct reports (i.e., subordinates). The theory of VDL suggests that dependent upon the quality of the relationship between leader and follower, followers are typically placed into one of two groups – the in-group or out-group [19]. Followers in the out-group have few social ties to the leader, meaning there is little trust, respect, and/or obligation to the leader [18]. Followers in the in-group have high-quality relationships with their leader, which include strong social ties, mutual trust, respect, and obligation. Further, Uhl-Bien and Maslyn [20], note these high-quality relationships lead to a shared identity between the leader and follower.

Graen and Uhl-Bien [18], note leader-member relationships appear to be created through a role-making process based on the characteristics and behaviors of both leaders and followers. While various demographic variables can predict the in-group or out-group status of followers, studies have found that when leaders and followers have similar personality traits, they are more likely to have a high-quality LMX and view one another more positively [7,21-25]. Moreover, leaders and followers who perceive one another as having similar attitudes and personality characteristics are

more likely to have a high-quality relationship [26].

Notably, Zhang and colleagues [27], examined how individual personality traits impact the quality of the relationship between a follower and leader. Leaders and followers had a high-quality LMX when they both had a proactive personality [27], defined as the tendency for people to act to influence their environment. Whereas when only one party had a proactive personality and the other did not, the quality of the relationship was negatively impacted. Bernerth and colleagues [22], reported similar findings when examining the impact of leader and follower Big Five personality characteristics on the quality of the relationship.

While the aforementioned studies provide supporting evidence for leader and follower personality traits impacting the overall leader-member exchange (i.e., relationship), there are other scholars who find contradictory evidence. For example, Oren and colleagues [28], posit similar personality patterns across leader and follower do not affect the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Instead, they found LMX is moderated by social exchanges between the leader and follower, meaning the quality of the leader-member relationship is only impacted by leader-follower social exchange, rather than personality. In addition, Dulebohn and colleagues [26], found that variables attributed to the leader accounted for the most variance in the quality of LMX, with follower characteristics having little impact on the quality of the relationship.

Dark Traits and Leader-Member Exchange

When examining the quality of the leader-follower relationship using LMX theory, most research has focused exclusively on the positive characteristics of leaders and followers. Many studies claim leaders and followers with similar positive personality traits (i.e., high in conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, and extraversion) have high-quality LMX, and fail to acknowledge the presence of leaders possessing dark personality traits [7]. Although this area of research has increased, a number of recent studies have found LMX is moderated by dark traits of the leader, not the follower [6,29,30], and even leaders with dark traits can develop high-quality relationships with their followers. For example, Lyons and colleagues [6], found that when a leader is exhibiting dark traits, and a high quality LMX is reported, the perceived abusiveness of the destructive leader decreases. Similar findings were published by Wang and colleagues [31], who found followers who reported high-quality relationships with their leader, had a reduced perception of narcissism relative to their leader. What these studies, in addition to the literature examining the relationship between LMX and dark triad traits, fail to consider is the impact of follower dark traits.

Notably, dark triad traits are rare, and the chances of both leaders and followers who are in a professional relationship possessing such attributes is considered unlikely [7]. According to Schyns [7], even if both leaders and followers exhibit narcissism, it is not likely they will have a high-quality relationship, as both parties would seek dominance. Conversely, Schyns notes it could be possible for both parties to exhibit traits of Machiavellianism and have a high-quality relationship should they decide to achieve joint goals

through the manipulation of others. However, these assumptions have yet to be tested in empirical research, and predictions on leader-members both exhibiting psychopathic traits is less clear, as persons with these traits have no genuine desire to connect with others in any way. In addition, individuals with psychopathic traits may attempt superficial charm, making it difficult to determine the potential quality of leader-member relationships.

Current Study

When examining the moderating role of LMX in abusive supervision and dark triad traits, Lyons and colleagues [6], discovered followers who perceived the leader-follower relationship as high-quality, were less likely to view their leader as showing dark triad traits of narcissism and psychopathy. As a result of these findings, Lyons and colleagues questioned if this could be attributed to followers possessing the same dark traits as their leader. Considering these findings, in conjunction with Schyns' [7] assumptions regarding dark triad traits and LMX, the purpose of this study is to determine whether dark personality traits of a leader and dark traits of a follower, using informant and self-report, impact the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Researchers hypothesized that the quality of the leader-follower relationship (LMX) will be predicted by the dark triad personality traits of the leader and dark triad personality traits of the follower. More specifically, when leader-follower dark traits align, the quality of the leader-follower relationship will be higher, compared to leaders and followers that have dark traits that do not align. The following hypotheses were tested:

H_1: The quality of the leader-follower relationship (LMX) can be predicted from dark-triad personality traits of the leader and DT personality traits of the follower.

H_2: Leader and follower narcissistic traits have a significant impact on the quality of the leader-follower relationship (LMX).

H_3: Leader and follower psychopathy traits have a significant impact on the quality of the leader-follower relationship (LMX).

H_4: Leader and follower Machiavellianism traits have a significant impact on the quality of the leader-follower relationship (LMX).

H_5: Leader and follower DT traits have a significant impact on the quality of the leader-follower relationship (LMX).

Methods

Participants

Researchers recruited a broad sample of participants for this study, which included 328 individuals, all of whom were recruited either via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) or social media (i.e., Facebook). While participants who completed the survey via MTurk received a small monetary compensation of $0.25 for their participation in this study, those who completed the survey through social media sampling were placed into a random drawing for a $50 gift card in which one winner was chosen. Participants were required to be employed full-time and work under the direction of a super-

visor. Of those who participated, a majority were male (61.5%). Participants' reported ages ranged from 18 to 64 with half of all participants ranging from 25 to 34 years of age (50%). The sample was primarily Caucasian (64.3%). Regarding education, around 90% of the participants in this study indicated they earned a bachelor's degree or higher, and an overwhelming majority of participants' supervisors also held a bachelor's degree or higher (89.5%). Furthermore, participants indicated they had been working in their industry for one to 10 years (67.7%), and a majority of their supervisors also served one to ten years in the industry (57.6%).

Measures

Short Dark Triad (SD3): The Short Dark Triad [32], a brief measure of dark personality traits, was utilized in this study to measure both follower and leader dark personality traits. The DT is comprised of three overlapping types of dark personality traits – Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism. All three groups are measured on the brief proxy measure, SD3. The SD3 consists of 27 items, all of which are measured on a five-point Likert scale with one indicating the lowest level of agreement (i.e., disagree strongly) and five indicating the highest level of agreement (i.e., agree strongly). The three DT personality traits of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism included on the SD3 were measured using nine items each.

Examples of items within the SD3 include, "It's not wise to tell your secrets (Machiavellianism)," "People see me as a natural leader (narcissism)," and "I like to get revenge on authorities (psychopathy)." When followers were asked to complete the SD3 for their leader (direct supervisor), the wording for each item was altered slightly to fit the statement to that of their leader (i.e., "People see my supervisor as a natural leader"). This method of reframing has been utilized in previous studies examining leader DT traits [6]. Reliability for the SD3 was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and was determined to possess strong reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX-7): The Leader-Member Exchange [18], instrument was utilized to measure the quality of relationship between a follower and their leader. The questionnaire includes seven items which ask the follower to describe their relationship with their current leader. For each item, they are asked to indicate the degree to which they perceive each item to be true. Examples of items include, "How well does your leader understand your job problems and needs?" and "I have enough confidence in my leader that I would defend and justify his/her decision if he or she were not present to do so." All seven items were measured on a five-point Likert scale with scores nearing five indicating a stronger, higher-quality leader-member relationship/exchange and scores nearing one indicating a relationship/exchange of lesser quality. Reliability for the LMX-7 was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and was determined to possess strong reliability ($\alpha = .94$)

Procedures

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, and prior to beginning the survey, potential participants completed the informed consent process. When responding to the measures,

eligible participants (followers) were asked to report various demographics about themselves. Next, they completed the Short Dark Triad Inventory (SD3) to measure their personality traits in the domains of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Followers were then asked to report demographic information for their current leader (direct supervisor). Followers were then asked to complete the SD3 once again, but to rate their leader's personality traits in the domains of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, from their perspective. Finally, following the completion of the SD3 for their leader, followers were asked to rate the quality of their relationship with their leader using the leader-member exchange (LMX-7) questionnaire.

Data Analysis and Results

A between subjects 2x2 factorial ANOVA was utilized to examine the interaction effect of leader and follower DT traits on the quality of leader-follower relationship. In addition, a simultaneous regression was conducted to test whether the quality of the leader-follower relationship could be predicted from dark triad traits of follower and DT traits of leader.

Simultaneous Regression Analysis

It was hypothesized that the quality of the leader-follower relationship (Y) could be predicted from dark triad traits of follower (X1) and DT traits of leader (X2). A simultaneous regression analysis was used to test this hypothesis. The data was screened to test the assumptions of a multiple regression including the assumption of multicollinearity. Results suggest that all assumptions were met; collinearity diagnostics for tolerance and VIF indicated that multicollinearity was not an issue when assessing the predictor variables. All predictor variables were entered simultaneously. Overall, the regression model testing these predictors was significant [$F_{(2, 325)}$ = 51.33, p < .001; R = .49; Adjusted R^2 = .24]. About 24% of the variance in the quality of a leader-follower relationship can be explained by these predictors.

When assessing each predictor individually, however, results suggest that DT traits of the leader were not a significant predictor regarding the quality of the leader-follower relationship [$t_{(325)}$ = -.49, p = .45; β = -.06]. DT traits of the follower are a significant predictor regarding the quality of the leader-follower relationship [$t_{(325)}$ = 4.16, p < .001; β = .55]. The squared semi-part that estimated how much variance in the quality of the leader-follower relationship was uniquely predicted from follower DT traits was sr^2 = .401. Thus, about 40% of the variance in the quality of the leader-follower relationship was uniquely predicted from followers' DT traits. These findings suggest that the leader's DT traits are not a significant predictor regarding the quality of the leader-follower relationship for this sample, but followers' dark-triad traits are a significant predictor and account for the most variance in the quality of the relationship.

Factorial ANOVA

Two independent variables (A, follower narcissistic traits; B, leader narcissistic traits) with two levels each (high and low) were tested to assess for the difference in the quality of the leader-follow-

er relationship. Results indicate a significant main effect of follower narcissistic traits [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = 6.78, p = .01, partial η^2 = .02] as well as leader narcissistic traits [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = 14.12, p < .001, partial η^2 = .04]. Followers reporting high levels of narcissistic traits (M=4.10, SD=.51) scored higher on LMX-7 than followers who reported low levels of narcissistic traits (M=3.52, SD=.62). In addition, followers reporting their leader had high levels of narcissistic traits (M=4.14, SD=.50) scored higher on LMX-7 than followers who reported their leader had low levels of narcissistic traits (M=3.52, SD=.60). Finally, these main effects were not qualified by a significant interaction effect [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = 1.52, p = .22]; indicating that together, leader-follower scores on the narcissistic subscale do not have a statistically significant impact on the quality of the relationship (LMX).

Two independent variables (A, follower psychopathic traits; B, leader psychopathic traits) with two levels each (high and low) were tested to assess for the difference in the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Results indicate a significant main effect of follower psychopathic traits [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = 9.77, p = .002, partial η^2 = .03] as well as leader psychopathic traits [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = 11.99, p < .001, partial η^2 = .04]. Followers reporting high levels of psychopathic traits (M=4.12, SD=.51) scored higher on LMX-7 than followers who reported low levels of psychopathic traits (M=3.52, SD=.61). In addition, followers reporting their leader had high levels of psychopathic traits (M=4.13, SD=.49) scored higher on LMX-7 than followers who reported their leader had low levels of psychopathic traits (M=3.52, SD=.61). Finally, these main effects were not qualified by a significant interaction effect [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = 1.47, p = .23]; indicating that together, leader-follower scores on the psychopathy subscale do not have a statistically significant impact on the quality of relationship (LMX).

When examining the interaction effect of leader-follower Machiavellian traits on the quality of the leader-follower relationship, researchers did not find any statistically significant main effects or interactions. This was due to followers reporting parallel scores on the Machiavellianism subscale when reporting for themselves and their leader.

Two independent variables (A, follower DT traits; B, leader DT traits) with two levels each (high and low) were tested to assess for the difference in the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Results indicate a significant main effect of follower DT traits [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = 5.54, p = .02, partial η^2 = .02] as well as leader DT traits [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = 9.04, p = .003, partial η^2 = .03]. Participants reporting high levels of DT traits (M=4.16, SD=.51) scored higher on LMX-7 than participants who reported low levels of DT traits (M=3.53, SD=.60). In addition, participants reporting their supervisor had high levels of DT traits (M=4.16, SD=.49) scored higher on LMX-7 than participants who reported their supervisor had low levels of DT traits (M=3.52, SD=.60). Finally, these main effects were not qualified by a significant interaction effect [$F_{(1, 324)}$ = .61, p = .44]; indicating that together, leader-follower scores on the SD3 do not have a statistically significant impact on the quality of relationship (LMX).

Discussion

The results of this study both compliment and contradict pre-

vious work in the field. As previously mentioned, several studies have found leaders and followers with similar personality traits are more likely to have high-quality LMX [7,21-23]. However, most of these studies have only examined positive personality traits, measured by Big Five personality inventories. As a result, this study sought to fill a gap in the literature by assessing whether leaders' and followers' dark triad personality traits could impact the development of high-quality, professional relationships.

According to the results of this study, about 24% of an LMX can be predicted by the DT traits of the leader and follower. In particular, the DT traits of the follower account for about 40% of the variance in the quality of the LMX, while the leader's DT traits alone are not a significant predictor. This confirms the hypothesis that the quality of the LMX can be predicted from DT personality traits of the leader and DT personality traits of the follower. Further, it directly contradicts Dulebohn and colleagues [26], who stated leader variables have the most variance on the quality of LMX.

This study also examined the impact of similar leader and follower DT personality traits on the quality of the LMX. With regard to narcissism, followers who reported narcissistic traits for both themselves and their leader reported high-quality LMX, showing it is possible to have a high-quality LMX despite there being high levels of narcissism in the relationship. This contradicts Schyns' [7], assumption that the LMX, in which the leaders and followers both had narcissistic traits, would be of low-quality. Further, based on these findings, we can infer that when both the leader and follower have high levels of narcissistic traits, the quality of the relationship is better when compared to followers and leaders who report low levels of narcissistic traits.

Although it is possible for a high-quality LMX to exist with the presence of narcissism in both the leader and follower, the results of this study did show the interaction of leader and follower narcissistic traits do not have a statistically significant impact on the quality of the LMX. Meaning, the DT personality traits of the leader do not depend on the dark personality traits of the follower to determine the quality of the relationship, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the DT personality traits of the leader and follower, individually, do impact the quality of the LMX confirming the second hypothesis.

As with narcissism, leaders and followers who were both reported to exhibit psychopathic traits can have high-quality relationships, based on the results of this study. This might be due to both parties in the LMX developing their relationship based on superficial charm, as posited by Schyns [7], but the true reason why this is the case is unclear. At the same time, the interaction of leader and follower psychopathy traits do not have a statistically significant impact on the quality of the LMX, so while the psychopathy traits of the leader and follower, separately, do impact the quality of the LMX, one does not depend on the other to make that impact. Nevertheless, the third hypothesis is confirmed with these results.

Finally, with regard to Machiavellianism, followers reported equal levels of this dark trait among themselves and their leaders, indicating there is no significant impact or interaction on the quality of the LMX based on this dark trait, nullifying this hypothesis.

These results are also in contrast to Schyns' [7], prediction that leaders and followers who both exhibit Machiavellianism could potentially have a high-quality relationship; however, Schyns' [7], prediction may still be possible if there had been varying levels of Machiavellianism among the sample. Lastly, the results of the current study indicated when a follower and leader have high levels of DT traits together, there is a significant impact on the quality of the LMX; however, like each trait individually, there was no statistically significant interaction effect. Regardless, the study confirmed the hypothesis that when the leader and the follower are both reported to have DT traits, there is a statistically significant impact on the quality of the LMX.

The results of the factorial ANOVAs infer that LMX is not moderated by only the DT traits of the leader; rather, the DT traits of both the leader and follower impact the quality of the LMX. This builds upon the work of Lyons et al. [6], whose study determined a leader's DT traits of narcissism and psychopathy moderate the quality of the LMX, and whether the follower's DT traits also play a role in LMX moderation. In addition, the results of this study contradict Oren and colleagues [28], who posited leader and follower similarities do not impact the quality of the LMX.

Limitations

For this study, participants were asked to rate themselves and their leader's DT traits using the SD3, which was originally developed to be a self-report measure in which the participants rate themselves in terms of DT traits [32]. Therefore, utilizing the SD3 to have participants rate their leader's DT traits raises concerns in the context of reliability and internal validity. Nevertheless, several studies have adopted similar reframing methods to obtain followers' ratings of their leader's DT traits and found acceptable to strong reliability as well as good internal consistency like that of our study [6,17,33]. Thus, researchers believe utilizing this method could be considered a strength to this study as it provides further statistical support that having followers rate their leaders by altering the frame of reference on the SD3 is an acceptable experimental practice.

Another potential limitation to these findings can be noted when examining how DT personality traits of both leader and follower impact the leader-follower relationship. Researchers found that narcissistic and psychopathic DT traits of the follower did significantly impact the quality of the leader-follower relationship. Additionally, similar results were found when examining narcissistic and psychopathic DT traits of the leader and the quality of the leader-follower relationship; however, when examining the means between groups for each main effect, the values were in proximity of one another, and the effect sizes (partial $\eta2$) were minute. This suggests the true difference between the groups within each main effect are minimal, thus, these findings should be interpreted with caution due to practicality.

Finally, there have been documented concerns with a recruitment method that was utilized for this study – Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is considered one of the most frequently used online data collections methods with its rapid increase in usage

over the last decade [34]. As expected with a widely utilized tool, concerns have presented themselves, specifically concerns with validity. For example, MTurk workers have been found to differ significantly on Big Five personality characteristics when compared to other laboratory samples [35]. Additionally, a threat to validity has been posed by MTurk workers inattention; therefore, it is recommended to use at least two attention checks throughout the survey [36,37]. This recommendation was not incorporated into this study and considered a notable limitation. Aguinis and colleagues [37], further recommended researchers decide on qualifications used to screen MTurk workers to reduce the threat of misrepresentation, which is something researchers did do. Participants who did not meet specific age, employment, and supervisory criteria were excluded from this study.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

The results of this study determined follower DT traits have a significant impact on the quality of the LMX. These results not only answer a question posed by Lyons et al. [6], on whether follower DT traits impact the quality of their relationship with their dark leaders, but it also enhances the body of research on the correlation between DT personality traits and LMX, as most studies on the topic have focused primarily on positive personality traits. As we merely explored the correlation between dark triad traits and leader-member exchanges in this study, it is important to note there are a myriad of variables we did not examine with the potential to impact the quality of LMX, which warrant further study, such as: level of education, gender, age, race or ethnicity, and so on.

The results of this study also add to the body of research on dark leadership, and further illuminate why followers choose to follow dark leaders—even if that reason is as simple as personality likeness, in addition to other situational factors. We should also consider these results when trying to understand how dark leaders come to be, and whether the high-quality LMX between dark leaders and dark followers leads to dark leadership development, therefore increasing the likelihood of dark followers becoming dark leaders in the future.

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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