Toxic Employees, Ethical Dilemmas, and Sustainability: Unveiling the Dark Triad in Organizations

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Resumo

Este estudo examina como funcionários tóxicos, especialmente aqueles que apresentam traços da Tríade Sombria (narcisismo, psicopatia e maquiavelismo), influenciam dilemas éticos e sustentabilidade nas organizações. Embora esses traços estejam tradicionalmente ligados a comportamentos contraproducentes, evidências emergentes sugerem que o narcisismo e a psicopatia também podem impulsionar comportamentos orientados para a sustentabilidade sob certas condições. Utilizando uma pesquisa quantitativa com 258 participantes, este estudo explora como esses traços afetam a Desviança Positiva Sustentável (DPS) e os Comportamentos Orientados para a Sustentabilidade (COS). Os resultados indicam que, enquanto o maquiavelismo não influencia significativamente a DPS, o narcisismo e a psicopatia podem fomentar desvios positivos em contextos éticos e sustentáveis. Esta pesquisa oferece insights cruciais para a gestão de funcionários tóxicos, aproveitando seus traços para promover resultados éticos e sustentáveis.

Résumé

Cette étude examine comment les employés toxiques, en particulier ceux présentant des traits de la Triade Sombre (narcissisme, psychopathie et machiavélisme), influencent les dilemmes éthiques et la durabilité dans les organisations. Alors que ces traits sont traditionnellement associés à des comportements contre-productifs, des preuves récentes suggèrent que le narcissisme et la psychopathie peuvent également encourager des comportements orientés vers la durabilité dans certaines conditions. À l'aide d'une enquête quantitative menée auprès de 258 participants, cette étude explore comment ces traits influencent la déviance positive durable (DPD) et les comportements orientés vers la durabilité (COD). Les résultats indiquent que si le machiavélisme n'a pas d'influence significative sur la DPD, le narcissisme et la psychopathie

peuvent favoriser une déviance positive dans des contextes éthiques et durables. Cette recherche offre des perspectives essentielles sur la gestion des employés toxiques tout en exploitant leurs traits pour promouvoir des résultats éthiques et durables.

Abstract

This study examines how toxic employees, specifically those exhibiting Dark Triad personality traits (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism), influence ethical dilemmas and sustainability in organizations. While these traits are traditionally linked to counterproductive work behaviors, emerging evidence suggests that narcissism and psychopathy can also drive sustainability-oriented behaviors under certain conditions. Using a quantitative survey of 258 participants, this study explores how these traits affect sustainable positive deviance (SPD) and sustainability-oriented behaviors (SOB). The findings indicate that while Machiavellianism does not significantly influence SPD, narcissism and psychopathy can foster positive deviance in ethical and sustainability-driven contexts. This research offers critical insights into managing toxic employees while leveraging their traits to promote ethical and sustainable outcomes.

1. Introduction

Organizations today face increasing pressure to integrate ethical and sustainable practices into their operations in response to growing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) demands (Afshar Jahanshahi et al., 2023). Most existing research on sustainability in organizational contexts has focused on positive constructs such as ethical leadership, prosocial motivation, and organizational citizenship behavior. These studies emphasize how constructive personality traits and value-driven leadership foster sustainability-oriented behaviors (De Roeck & Farooq, 2018; Brière et al., 2021). However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to understanding how individuals with socially aversive traits—specifically those associated with the Dark Triad (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism)—interact with sustainability imperatives.

Traditionally, the Dark Triad has been linked to unethical, manipulative, and counterproductive work behaviors (O'Boyle et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2021). Yet, emerging research suggests a more nuanced perspective: certain Dark Triad traits, particularly narcissism and psychopathy, may under specific conditions lead to unconventional but constructive outcomes, such as innovation, rule-breaking in pursuit of ethical goals, and what has been termed sustainable positive deviance (Galperin, 2012; Wisse et al., 2015). Despite these initial insights, the mechanisms through which such traits contribute to sustainability-related behaviors remain underdeveloped, especially in cross-cultural organizational contexts.

This study aims to address this gap by examining how the three Dark Triad traits influence Sustainable Positive Deviance Behavior (SPDB)—a form of ethical norm-challenging that promotes environmental and social responsibility. Specifically, we investigate whether these traits moderate or directly affect the relationship between sustainability-oriented behaviors (SOB) and SPDB.

Research Question: How do the distinct traits of the Dark Triad (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) influence sustainable positive deviance in organizational settings?

By exploring this question through a cross-cultural sample of professionals and business students in France and Brazil, this study offers a novel contribution to the literature by highlighting the paradoxical potential of toxic traits in fostering sustainability under certain conditions. It also provides valuable insights for organizational leaders seeking to harness deviant or disruptive tendencies in the service of ethical and sustainable goals.

2. Theoretical Background

The Dark Triad comprises three distinct yet overlapping personality traits, each rooted in different motivational and behavioral profiles (Spain et al., 2014). Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, and a need for admiration, often manifesting in self-enhancement behaviors and a desire for status and recognition. While narcissists may initially appear charismatic, they often struggle with maintaining genuine interpersonal relationships (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Psychopathy, in contrast, reflects impulsivity, emotional detachment, and a lack of empathy or guilt. Psychopathic individuals are often thrill-seeking and unconcerned with social or moral norms, which may lead to reckless yet bold actions (O'Boyle et al., 2016). Machiavellianism is defined by a strategic and calculated approach to interpersonal manipulation, driven by self-interest and a cynical worldview. Unlike the impulsive nature of psychopathy, Machiavellians tend to plan their actions carefully and exhibit high self-control

(Nguyen et al., 2021). These distinctions underscore that while the traits share socially aversive tendencies, their underlying mechanisms and manifestations differ significantly and may yield divergent outcomes in organizational contexts.

Societal behaviors refer to actions that individuals undertake to contribute to the collective well-being, including prosocial activities like volunteering, charity, and community engagement (De Roeck & Farooq, 2018). These behaviors foster ethical workplace cultures and reinforce positive environmental and social responsibility. Sustainability-oriented behaviors (SOB) are actions that specifically promote environmental and social sustainability within organizational settings (Temminck et al., 2015). Examples include energy conservation, waste reduction, and active participation in corporate social responsibility initiatives. SOB are crucial for promoting long-term organizational sustainability and ethical business practices, forming the foundation for sustainable positive deviance (Brière et al., 2021).

Prior research links these traits to counterproductive work behaviors, but emerging studies suggest that they can also drive unconventional positive behaviors. Sustainable positive deviance (SPD) occurs when employees challenge existing norms to promote ethical or environmental improvements, often at personal or professional risk (Galperin, 2012; Brière et al., 2021).

This paper investigates the role of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism in SPD. We hypothesize that:

- H1: Sustainability-oriented behaviors (SOB) are positively associated with SPD.
- H2: Narcissism moderates the relationship between SOB and SPD.
- H3: Psychopathy moderates the relationship between SOB and SPD.
- H4: Machiavellianism moderates the relationship between SOB and SPD.

Figure 1 shows the initially proposed model.
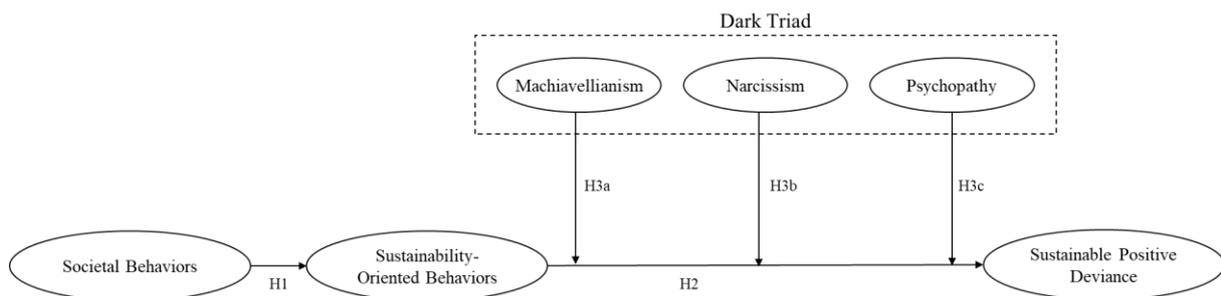
Figure 1 Initially proposed model.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Instrument and Measures

We conducted an empirical quantitative study, surveying business students online in France and Brazil from December 2023 to February 2024. Originally in English, the survey was translated and back-translated to the targeted languages, French and Portuguese (Brislin, 1970). Using G*Power 3.1, we performed a power analysis assuming a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), power level of 0.90, fourteen predictors (including nine control variables), and an alpha level of 0.05, determining a minimum required sample size of 166 (Faul et al., 2009; Nitzl, 2016). With 258 responses, our sample size is robust.

The constructs of Societal Behaviors, PEB, Dark Triad – narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism –and SPDB were organized as first-order constructs. The measurement items were adapted from previous studies, precisely Societal Behaviors from De Roeck & Farooq (2018), PEB from Temminck et al. (2015), Dark Triad from Jones & Paulhus (2014), and SPDB from Brière et al. (2019) and Galperin (2012). All items were scored on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), except for the constructs of PEB and SPDB, from 1 (never) to 7 (always). We included nine control variables (i.e., age, gender, nationality, education, industry, department, firm size, position, and experience) as these factors might impact the final dependent variable (Benitez et al., 2020).

3.2 Data Collection and Sample

We targeted business students over 18 with any professional experience from two schools in France and Brazil, selected for convenience and feasibility. Following ethical approval in September 2023, data collection took place from December 2023 to February 2024. We gathered 282 responses, ultimately excluding those without consent or incomplete, resulting in 258 valid responses: 152 in English (59%), 67 in Portuguese (26%), and 39 in French (15%).

Our sample of 258 participants had diverse demographics in gender, nationality, industry, role, organizational size, and experience. We have a high level of homogeneity regarding education level and age, due to our focus on students. Most respondents were 22-23 (47.29%), followed by 18-21 (29.46%). Women comprised 57.36%, and men 41.09%. Nationalities included 59.30% French and 20.54% Brazilian. Education levels varied slightly, with 31.01% holding a high school degree and 26.74% a bachelor's degree. Participants primarily worked in professional services (13.18%), financial services (12.02%), and retailing (11.63%), with 53.88% holding intern positions and 70.16% having less than one year of experience. Organizational sizes ranged, with 16.28% in small firms (1-9 employees) and

15.50% in large firms (10,000+ employees).

3.3 Data Analysis

This study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the proposed conceptual model. PLS was chosen for its suitability in exploratory research and its ability to handle complex models with multiple constructs and relationships (Sarstedt et al., 2021). The analyses were conducted using SmartPLS 4 software. Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was applied to assess the significance of path coefficients, indicator loadings, and weights.

The measurement model was evaluated using indices such as the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), the unweighted least squares discrepancy (d_ULS), and the geodesic discrepancy (d_G) to assess overall fit. Internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were confirmed using composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio, respectively. Most factor loadings exceeded 0.7, reflecting the adequacy of the indicators.

The structural model tested hypothesized direct effects, moderation effects, and control variables. We assessed the significance levels and R^2 values to evaluate explained variance and relationship effect sizes.
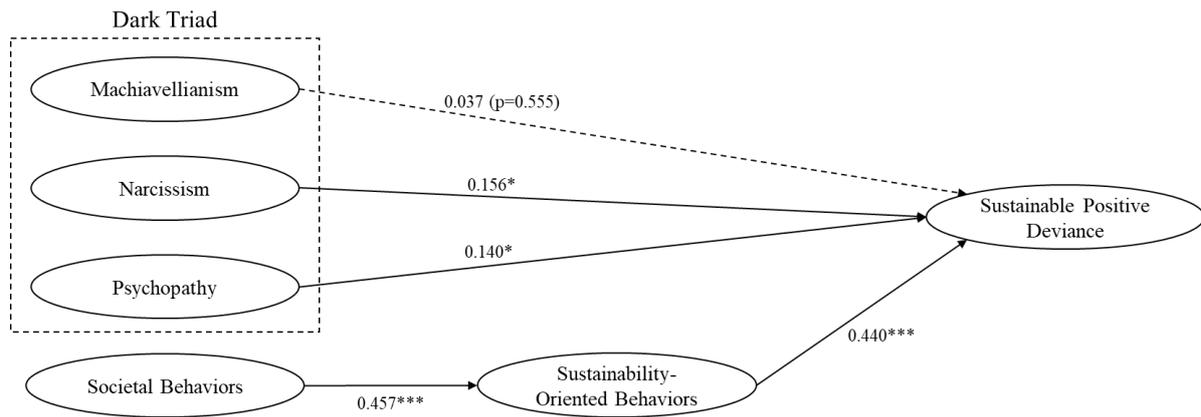
4. Results

The initial analysis supported the proposed relationships between SOB and SPD. However, the moderating effects of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy did not conform to the hypothesized model. Figure 2 illustrates the results of the original model, showing that while SOB significantly predicted SPD ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), the anticipated moderation effects did not reach significance.
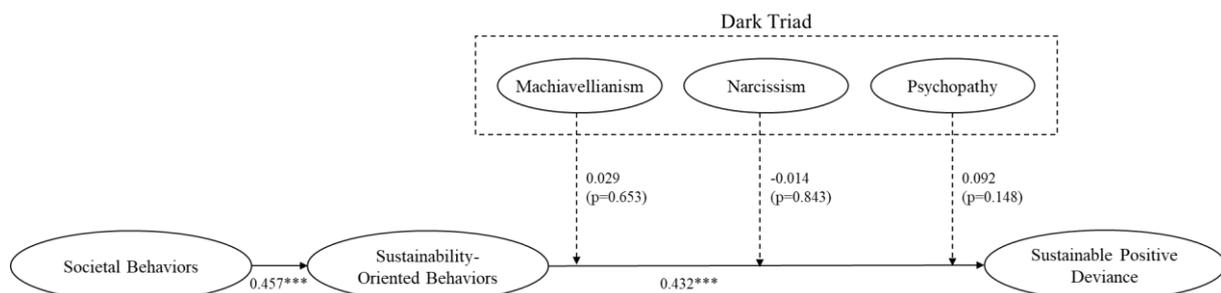
Figure 2 Results of the proposed model.

Given these findings, we adapted our model to explore direct effects rather than moderation. The revised model (Figure 3) reveals that narcissism ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$) and psychopathy ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.02$) directly influence SPD, indicating that individuals with these traits may independently drive sustainability-oriented deviance. In contrast, Machiavellianism had no significant direct impact.

Figure 3 Results of the new model.

5. Discussions

The findings of this study challenge the traditional perception that Dark Triad traits are solely detrimental to organizations. The results indicate that narcissism and psychopathy can have a direct positive effect on SPD, highlighting the complex nature of these traits in workplace dynamics. Narcissistic individuals may engage in SPD as a means of gaining recognition, whereas psychopathic individuals may leverage their norm-challenging tendencies to promote ethical and sustainable behaviors. Conversely, Machiavellianism did not exhibit a significant effect, suggesting that its calculated and strategic nature may not align with the spontaneity required for SPD.

Managerial Contributions: From a managerial perspective, organizations should adopt nuanced strategies when dealing with employees exhibiting Dark Triad traits. Instead of viewing them solely as risks, managers can create structured opportunities where narcissistic employees can channel their need for admiration into sustainability initiatives. Psychopathic individuals, known for their risk-taking behavior, can be placed in roles requiring innovation and challenging unethical practices. However, organizations must also implement ethical oversight mechanisms to ensure these tendencies align with organizational sustainability goals.

Theoretical Contributions: This study advances the literature on personality-driven

behaviors in organizations by demonstrating that Dark Triad traits are not universally negative. The shift from a moderation-based model to a direct-effects model (as seen in Figures 2 and 3) highlights the need to reassess how these traits interact with organizational sustainability efforts. By demonstrating that some elements of the Dark Triad can foster constructive deviance, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the role of personality in ethical decision-making and organizational change.

Limitations and Future Research: While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations suggest avenues for future research. First, the sample—comprising primarily business students and professionals—may not fully represent the complexity of real-world organizational environments, particularly those marked by rigid hierarchies, high-stakes decision-making, or intense operational pressures. Second, the study does not consider sector-specific dynamics, which could significantly influence how Dark Triad traits are expressed and perceived in workplace contexts. Different industries may foster or inhibit particular behaviors, thereby shaping the relationship between dark personality traits and sustainability-oriented actions.

Third, although the findings establish important correlations, causal relationships remain unexamined. A longitudinal design would help determine whether individuals high in narcissism or psychopathy consistently engage in sustainable positive deviance over time, or whether such behaviors are contextually triggered. Fourth, while leadership style and organizational culture are briefly mentioned, their potential as moderating factors merits more rigorous exploration. These elements likely shape how Dark Triad traits translate into either ethical or counterproductive behavior.

Supporting this, McLarty et al. (2022) highlight the critical role of situational and organizational factors in shaping the behavioral expression of dark personality traits. Their influence may depend on role expectations, workplace norms, and contextual pressures. Future research should therefore investigate the underlying psychological mechanisms that connect narcissism, psychopathy, and sustainable positive deviance behavior (SPDB), with a focus on how and why these traits may contribute to sustainability-driven deviance across varied professional and cultural settings.

Comparative studies contrasting student populations with employees in diverse industries could further clarify how leadership responsibilities, organizational structure, or sector-specific demands moderate these relationships. Additionally, examining the influence of organizational culture, social norms, and ethical climate could yield important insights into how unconventional or norm-challenging behaviors might be redirected toward sustainability-driven

innovation.

6. Final Remarks

In line with Enriquez's (2005) view, organizations should recognize that managing individuals is also about navigating symbolic contracts and unconscious dynamics, especially with personalities shaped by complex social and affective histories. This study provides a nuanced understanding of the role of Dark Triad traits in promoting sustainable positive deviance. While traditionally associated with negative behaviors, narcissism and psychopathy can also foster ethical and sustainability-oriented actions. The findings suggest that organizations should not categorically dismiss individuals with Dark Triad traits but should instead implement management strategies that harness their potential for driving constructive deviance. Future research should explore the contextual factors—such as leadership style and organizational culture—that may further influence these dynamics.

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