

A R T I C L E S

SHADY STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR: RECOGNIZING STRATEGIC FOLLOWERSHIP OF DARK TRIAD FOLLOWERS

BIRGIT SCHYNS
Neoma Business School

BARBARA WISSE
University of Groningen and Durham University Business School

STACEY SANDERS
University of Groningen

The importance of strategic behavior in organizations has long been recognized. However, so far the literature has primarily focused on *leaders*' strategic behavior, largely ignoring *followers*' strategic behavior. In this paper, we take a follower trait perspective on strategic follower behavior, specifically focusing on how followers' dark triad traits (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) influence their strategic behavior. We argue that dark triad–related strategic follower behavior is likely to have negative effects for fellow organizational members and the organization as a whole. We also present “red flag” behaviors that may signal followers' tendencies to engage in shady strategic behaviors, then put forward factors that may mitigate or increase the occurrence of shady strategic behaviors by followers scoring high on dark triad traits, focusing especially on follower attributes and specifics of the organizational context. Finally, we discuss if and how followers' dark triad traits could benefit the organization and highlight emerging issues in research on strategic follower behavior.

While research is beginning to acknowledge the role of followers in the leadership process, most research to date puts emphasis on the reactions of followers to leader behavior rather than on followers taking an active role in organizations. For example, theory and research focusing on follower types (e.g., Kellerman, 2007; Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012) differentiate followers depending on the way they react to leader behavior. While types of followers can show more or less active reactions, they still very much relate to “following” in the traditional sense: The leader is the central figure and the follower is seen as a hindrance, an enabler, or a henchman. The scant research that views followers as more preemptive individuals describes followers as “serving” and eager to contribute to common organizational goals. For example, Campbell (2000, p. 56) summarized the research portraying

proactive followers as going “beyond mere job requirements,” to be “actively engaged,” to have “integrity,” to be “principled,” and to be “guided by higher values.”

The research on (pro-)active behavior of followers has stressed its potential positive characteristics. The question we pursue here looks at the darker flip side of follower proactive behavior. Specifically, to turn around Campbell's (2000) summary, we ask this: What if followers are guided by the wrong values, lack a moral compass and compassion for others, and use their positions as followers to pursue their own goals? In answering this question, we explore follower strategic behavior, focusing on how followers may strategically attempt to achieve their own goals rather than reacting to the goals set by the leader. Strategic behavior is of particular importance in organizations not only because it is directly linked to outcomes (e.g., Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956), but also because it takes into account potential future

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reactions of others (e.g., Burks, Carpenter, Götte, & Rustichini, 2008). Strategic behavior thus has distinct temporal and relational components as well as a goal achievement component. Indeed, leaders and other organizational members can be the target of strategic followers' behavior in the sense that followers may try to influence them purposefully to achieve their own goals, which could have potentially detrimental consequences for the organization and/or its members.

When focusing on the dark side of followers' behavior from an aberrant personality/aberrant behavior perspective (cf. Wille, De Fuyt, & De Clercq, 2013), it makes sense to consider followers' dark triad personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Therefore, we review and synthesize the literature on dark triad personality traits and their behavioral consequences in organizations. So far, research into organizational behavior linked to dark triad personality seems to focus mainly on direct negative outcomes of dark triad behavior but hardly considers that these behaviors can be used by followers in a strategic manner to achieve their own goals with a potentially longer-term perspective. Therefore, our review specifically highlights the potential of dark triad followers to engage in strategic behavior.

Discussing followers' dark triad-related strategic behavior is relevant for three reasons. First, some dark triad followers might be keenly interested in being promoted to leader positions (e.g., Dahling, Whitaker, & Levy, 2009; Elliot & Thrash, 2001). Given that those in leadership positions usually have greater power, the position also offers the opportunity to cause greater damage (Wisse & Rus, 2012). This makes the detection of problematic behavior prior to a possible promotion important. Second, leaders are often viewed as the primary developers and executors of strategy, and strategic behavior is less expected from followers. We posit that as a consequence, potential shady strategic behavior of followers may be less closely scrutinized and that organizations may miss out on opportunities to mitigate the destructive influences of dark triad followers. In addition, the current focus on leaders in the context of dark triad personalities in the workplace limits our knowledge of these types of behavior across hierarchical levels. Third, we contend that the strategic means one can employ are a function of one's role within the organization. To put it differently, although the general goals and behavioral tendencies of dark triad followers and leaders may not differ, the means they have at their disposal to

achieve their goals or act in line with their behavioral tendencies differ, and, consequently, their strategic behavior also differs.

In the following sections, we discuss the unique aspects of each dark triad trait to explain its impact on followers' strategic behavior and deduce a list of red-flag strategic follower behaviors to more clearly indicate what organizations need to look out for. We then discuss how leaders and organizational context variables can play a role in structurally mitigating (or stimulating) self-interested and potentially destructive strategic behavior of followers in organizations. First, however, we discuss what we mean by strategic follower behavior.

STRATEGIC FOLLOWER BEHAVIOR

Strategic behavior involves setting goals, determining actions to achieve these goals, and mobilizing resources to complete these actions (Mintzberg, 1987). Bruner and colleagues (1956, p. 54) defined strategic behavior this way: "A strategy refers to a pattern of decisions in the acquisition, retention, and utilization of information that serves to meet certain objectives, i.e., to insure certain forms of outcome and to insure against certain others." Although strategic behavior operates primarily on the level of concrete activities, it also requires elaborate decision making.

Strategic follower behavior thus includes decision making regarding the goals the follower wants to achieve and action taken to achieve these goals. This is in line with what most goal-pursuit models portray (Gollwitzer, 1996). These models usually describe several phases in the goal-pursuit process. The first phase is pre-decisional and occurs when preferences are determined and deliberated upon. Next the person determines the desired preferences for pursuit and when, where, and how to start. Finally, the person initiates action and continues until the desired outcomes are achieved. It is important to note the anticipatory nature of strategic behavior, including taking into account the likely reaction of others.

Strategic follower behavior can thus involve any type of behavior that is goal oriented and takes place in the leadership context. An example is an employee who wants to see the travel budget increased, who seeks support for the idea from fellow team members and then tries to get the team leader to make an appeal to the management team of the organization. Another example is an employee who wants a promotion and therefore ingratiates herself with her supervisor by making jokes, taking dull chores off the

supervisor's hands, and agreeing with him or her on important matters.

An issue that is important to consider here is the matter of whether or not strategic follower behavior can be self-serving, toxic, or destructive in nature. We argue that it can be. Although followers are expected to create value for organizations or to contribute to the accomplishment of shared organizational objectives (see Yukl, 2010; Zoogah, 2014), in reality, followers sometimes fail to pursue shared objectives and instead pursue their own interests (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006). Indeed, the normative expectation of what a follower ought to do does not need to coincide with the actual behavior that is exhibited. In fact, it does not preclude follower goal-oriented behavior that is abusive, harmful to others, or otherwise unethical (Kellerman, 2007; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Strategic follower behavior can therefore also be self-serving, counterproductive, political, or destructive. We argue here that particular types of followers are prone to showing this kind of negative strategic behavior—namely, those who score higher on dark triad personality traits.

Indeed, people's goal striving is influenced by their personality traits, and this includes dark triad traits. Trait activation theory (e.g., Christiansen & Tett, 2008) stipulates that the dark triad traits can be seen as latent propensities to behave in a certain way as a response to trait-relevant cues. Given that expressing one's traits is intrinsically satisfying, followers are likely to feel good about expressing their dark triad traits in various organizational contexts. The functionalist approach to personality offers a similar viewpoint, as it sees personality as a factor that affects strategies that individuals employ for improving the quality of their lives (Harms, Spain, & Wood, 2014). The functionalist approach further argues that each trait comes with its own pattern of motives, abilities, schemas, sets of expectations, and perceptual biases, leading people who score high on a certain trait to approach organizational situations in a specific manner (see Harms et al., 2014).

As we delineate below, followers high in dark triad personality traits are likely to have self-serving preferences, making them eager to strive for goals that fulfill these intrinsic values or that support their personal self-concept (see Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Their actions aimed at achieving their self-interested goals can be negative or harmful to others. Depending on the type of dark triad personality they possess, their strategic behavior may differ, for instance, as a result of their (competence in) anticipating the future

and of others' reactions. In the following, we first discuss in more detail what dark triad traits are and then explain how each may affect strategic follower behavior.

DARK TRIAD TRAITS AND STRATEGIC FOLLOWER BEHAVIOR

Although all 3 of the Dark Triad members are predisposed to engage in exploitative interpersonal behavior, their motivations and tactics vary. (Jones & Paulhus, 2017, p. 1)

The dark triad is a constellation of three socially aversive, partly overlapping traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The three traits are all characterized by the tendency to influence others for selfish gains. They are associated with an instrumental approach to people and organizations, and they correlate positively with disagreeableness (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Yet they can also be distinguished from each other in various ways. Indeed, each of the three dark triad traits can be recognized by its own specific pattern of motives, abilities, perceptions, and employed tactics (Harms et al., 2014; Jones & Paulhus, 2017). Narcissism stands out from the other two dark triad traits in terms of a particularly strong sense of entitlement and self-importance and a high need for power (Harms et al., 2014; Paulhus, 2014). Machiavellianism is characterized by a particularly cynical take on human nature and a calculating and deceitful interpersonal style (Christie & Geis, 1970). Psychopathy—often viewed as the darkest of the dark triad (cf. Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013)—is characterized by a lack of empathy and remorse and a reckless and manipulative interpersonal style (Cleckley, 1941). Most recent research on the role of the dark triad traits in the work context focuses on subclinical levels and gradual differences in the traits rather than on the clinical extremes (see, e.g., Harms & Spain, 2015; Spain, Harms, & LeBreton, 2014).

Importantly, the follower role provides specific opportunities to express dark triad traits, and these behavioral expressions differ from leaders' trait expressions. One reason for these differences relates to power differences. In general, followers have less power than leaders do. Previous research has shown that power allows people to act in line with their internal traits (Weick & Guinote, 2008). Followers have less control than leaders over decisions, the allocation of resources, and the administration of rewards and punishments (Rus, Van Knippenberg, &

Wisse, 2010; Yukl & Falbe, 1991); their behavior is more restricted because of their dependence on others and the need to adhere to the rules set forth by the leader. This, in turn, has consequences for their strategic behavior.

First, it might mean that followers have to be more covert in terms of expressing their traits, especially in attempts to influence their leader (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Although strategically influencing the leader may be particularly helpful in trying to achieve certain goals, followers are subjected more strongly to social constraints when dealing with a person high in power. Trait-imbued strategic behavior that involves coworkers may, in this respect, be easier. Furthermore, followers typically have fewer resources at their disposal (in terms of decision latitude, contacts, information, etc.) than leaders and thus have fewer options when it comes to expressing their internal traits, and therefore have to be more strategic about their strategic behavior.

In sum, followers scoring high in dark triad traits reflect in specific ways on situations to achieve their strategic goals and make decisions on how and when to act, and are predisposed to respond to situations in unique ways. We posit that these behavioral expressions are influenced by their role as followers and the (lack of) power that comes with this role.

Narcissism

Narcissists think that everything that happens around them, in fact, everything that others say and do, is or should be about them. (Babiak & Hare, 2006, p. 40)

Narcissism is probably the most well-researched dark triad trait with respect to workplace behavior and outcomes (Grijalva & Harms, 2014). Narcissists have a strong sense of entitlement and a constant need for attention and admiration. They are arrogant and consider themselves to be superior to others (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, Beersma, & McIlwain, 2011; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The behavior of narcissists is mainly motivated by the goal to protect their grandiose self-views. According to Back and colleagues (2013), narcissists use two different ways to do this: assertive self-enhancement (narcissistic admiration) and antagonistic self-protection (narcissistic rivalry). These strategies are tied to different behaviors: charm for admiration (self-assured, dominant, and expressive behaviors) and aggressiveness for rivalry (annoyed, hostile, and socially insensitive behaviors). These behaviors are linked to interactions with others, which makes them particularly relevant for strategic behavior. In the following,

we review what we know about narcissists and their behavior in the workplace and highlight problematic strategic behaviors.

Narcissism and follower strategic behavior in the work context. Narcissists' strategic behavior in terms of goal pursuit is not likely to be positive for organizational effectiveness. For example, Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007) investigated the relationship between narcissism and organizational strategy, acquisitions, and organizational performance. They found that narcissistic CEOs "favor bold actions that attract attention" (p. 351). That companies with a narcissistic CEO had more extreme and fluctuating performance than companies with a non-narcissistic CEO further testifies to the idea that for narcissists, attention (at almost any cost) is the main driver of behavior.

Grandiose narcissists "need a stage to shine" (Nevicka et al., 2011, p. 910) and are likely to make strategic choices that enable them to do so, regardless of the costs to others (related to narcissistic admiration in the sense of Back et al., 2013). When narcissists are followers, Spain and colleagues (2014) showed, they demonstrate organizational citizenship behavior only if it allows them to present themselves favorably—that is, if it is observable by others. So even potentially positive behavior of narcissistic followers may serve the function of pursuing their own goals. That also makes it likely that narcissistic followers make very clear choices in terms of which organizational citizenship behaviors are strategically useful to them. Overall, when narcissistic followers are confronted with situations that may offer strategic value for them in achieving their goal of preserving their grandiose self-views, they first decide how the situation can benefit them and which following behavior they can show to take advantage of the situation. Rather than asking how a situation can be addressed for the good of the company, they focus on how it affects them personally.

Narcissists appear to have a higher likelihood of being selected as leaders (Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2015), though this seems to be the case only when they are newer to a team (Ong, Roberts, Arthur, Woodman, & Akehurst, 2016). This matches with their need to shine and outshine others. Campbell and Campbell (2009) argued that, in the longer term, narcissistic leadership is characterized by overconfident decision making, volatile leadership performance, and poor management. Combining these considerations with findings by Judge, LePine, and Rich (2006) that narcissism is positively related to self-ratings of leadership but

that it is negatively related to other ratings of leadership again highlights the problematic nature of narcissistic leadership.

This tendency of narcissists to overestimate themselves with regard to their performance is also problematic in terms of follower behavior. We argue that to keep up their image both to themselves and to others, they are more likely to overclaim their influence and take credit for others' work. Doing so publicly serves the long-term goal of achieving promotion and thus confirming their grandiose self-view. Narcissists also overrate their own creativity, whereas others see no difference between them and non-narcissists in terms of creative performance (Goncalo, Flynn, & Kim, 2010). However, narcissists seem to be good at convincing others that they are creative (Goncalo et al., 2010). Interestingly, research has shown that follower narcissism is positively related to supervisor ratings of employee innovative behavior (Wisse, Barelds, & Rietzschel, 2015). Thus, the danger is that narcissistic followers get away with their overclaiming, ultimately to the detriment of actual creativity and innovation.

In general, narcissism is also related to counterproductive work behavior (CWB; see meta-analyses by O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012, and Grijalva & Newman, 2015). Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, and Fraley (2015) found in a large-scale online study that the exploitative/entitlement dimension of narcissism is particularly positively related to CWB. As narcissists' sense of entitlement makes them less likely to feel bound by rules, they apparently see nothing wrong with their own CWB.

The behaviors outlined above refer mainly to assertive self-enhancement (Back et al., 2013). Alternatively, narcissists could interpret follower situations as threatening to their goal of preserving their grandiose self-views—for example, when they receive feedback. In such cases, narcissists may opt for a more aggressive response (Bushman & Thomaes, 2011) related to narcissistic rivalry (Back et al., 2013), such as being hostile to the leader. Recent research has found that narcissists tend to devalue the source of advice (Kausel, Culbertson, Leiva, Slaughter, & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, a strategic behavior of narcissists could be to undermine the leader as a source of negative feedback to distract from their own mistakes.

We argue here that there are situations in which narcissists can act for the good of the organization, but the motivation is always their own self-enhancement. According to Campbell (1999), narcissists are attracted to those who serve as a means to enhance their self-esteem (i.e., "trophy" partners and friends). The same is

likely true in organizational contexts, in that narcissists are likely to relate to those who make them feel good (Campbell, Hoffman, Campbell, & Marchisio, 2011). That means that in terms of relationships in the workplace, narcissistic followers will focus on a few others in whose glory they can bask. Therefore, their behavior toward those trophies might differ from their behavior toward others in the organization, as it is important to the narcissist not to lose those relationships. Table 1 shows red-flag behaviors for each of the dark triad traits.

Machiavellianism

A wise ruler ought never to keep faith when by doing so it would be against his interests.

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 64

Machiavellians are sly, deceptive, distrusting, and manipulative. They are characterized by cynical and misanthropic beliefs, callousness, a striving for agentic goals (i.e., money, power, and status), and the use of cunning influence tactics (Christie & Geis, 1970). In contrast to narcissists, Machiavellians do not necessarily have to be the center of attention and are satisfied with the role of puppeteer, unobtrusively pulling the strings. They are also not impulsive (in contrast to psychopaths) and act in a calculating manner. Machiavellians tend to value expediency over relationships and, as such, have little difficulty in choosing personal gain over the interests of others (Sakalaki, Richardson, & Thépaut, 2007; Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). In sum, Machiavellians regard others as means to their own ends (Burris, Rempel, Munteanu, & Therrien, 2013). This makes them particularly prone to using strategic behaviors to pursue their own goals, and they lie, cheat, and scheme to get what they want.

Machiavellianism and follower strategic behavior in the work context. Machiavellians are politically oriented and view the world through a self-interested lens (Christie & Geis, 1970), and they typically enjoy and excel in strategic behaviors. In fact, in studies on the effects of the three dark triad traits, Machiavellianism is most often regarded as linked to strategic action.

Machiavellians' commitment to agentic goals is likely to stimulate them to thoroughly scan the organizational arena for opportunities to maximize their own profits (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). This increases their chances of identifying situations that offer strategic value for them personally. Moreover, Machiavellians are not impulsive and are likely to

TABLE 1
Strategic Red Flag Behaviors for Each of the Dark Triad Traits

Red flag behaviors	N	M	P	Sample reference
Over-claiming their contribution to the organization and taking credit, when on close examination their claims do not hold	x			Goncalo et al., 2010
Showing behavior (e.g., proactivity) in ways that serve to promote themselves (e.g., public organizational citizenship behavior)	xx	x		Spain et al., 2014
Becoming aggressive after negative feedback and devaluing the feedback source	xx			Bushman and Thomaes, 2011
Treating valued members of the organization (trophies) in different ways than those they do not perceive as adding to their own positive self-views	xx			Campbell et al., 2011
Demonstrating a self-oriented perspective in combination with the employment of a “choose your battles” mindset		xx		Sakalaki et al., 2007
Actively engaging in behaviors that function to control others or minimize their influence	x	xx	x	Jonason and Webster, 2012
Keeping knowledge to themselves rather than sharing with colleagues		xx		Liu, 2008
Making use of manipulation tactics to reach strategic goals		xx	x	Jonason and Webster, 2012
Scheming for personal benefit without taking the perspective of others into account	x	xx	x	Sakalaki et al., 2007
Choosing competition over cooperation		x	xx	Ryckman et al., 1990
Making fast, short-term–focused decisions without accounting for the possible negative consequences for others			xx	Jones and Paulhus, 2014
Making big, bold, and risky decisions that are not held back by moral boundaries and/or organizational rules	x		xx	Jones, 2014
Questioning authority figures, existing rules, and the status quo to deregulate organizational functioning			xx	Miner, 2006
Bullying and/or criticizing co-workers to direct their attention toward the interpersonal relationship instead of the tasks at hand			xx	Clarke, 2005
Seducing co-workers to live a “wild” life and/or seducing co-workers or supervisors into a romantic relationship		x	xx	Jonason and Webster, 2012

Note: N = narcissism, M = Machiavellianism, P = psychopathy; xx = main behavior, x = secondary behavior

methodically engage in the process of reflecting on strategic opportunities and the consequences of potential response options. When deciding on a strategic goal, they prioritize goals that maximize their personal benefit (Sakalaki et al., 2007). During this process of reflection, they tend to regard other organizational members, such as their leader and team members, as untrustworthy and self-interested individuals (Sakalaki et al., 2007). Given their distrust of others, they may mainly consider options where the influence of others is minimal or can be controlled. Machiavellians are likely to weigh the controllability and feasibility of the potential strategic options and evaluate those options more favorably if they perceive that they can control the situation and if self-interested outcomes are more likely. Thus, in terms of strategic follower behavior, Machiavellians will show strategic behavior that carefully considers both others and the outcome of their behavior while trying to keep this behavior unnoticed.

It has been posited that Machiavellians are unwilling to share knowledge with others because

knowledge is a source of competitive advantage that they would rather keep to themselves (Liu, 2008). That is, Machiavellians hide knowledge as a strategic behavior to further their own advantage in an organization. Moreover, given their lack of communal orientation (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013), they will consider lying, cheating, and misrepresenting information if that helps them to control the situation.

Machiavellians also have a higher overall tendency to engage in counterproductive work behaviors, including harmful interpersonal acts similar to abuse (Dahling et al., 2009) and bullying at work (Pilch & Turska, 2015). However, Wisse and Sleebos (2016) found that Machiavellianism is positively related to abuse in work teams only for people occupying a strong and powerful position at work. Apparently, a strong power position allows Machiavellians to safely engage in such behaviors without having to be afraid of repercussions. These findings suggest that Machiavellians may strategically use abusive means to get their way if they feel they can safely do so. In other words, their destructiveness is

closely tied to their perceptions of how to further their self-interest: If being destructive helps them to achieve their goals, they do it (see Kessler et al., 2010). Notably, this focus on self-interest has been used to explain why there is a positive relationship between Machiavellianism and self-related work commitment (career commitment), and a negative relationship between Machiavellianism and other-related work commitment (organizational, supervisor, and team commitment; Becker & O'Hair, 2007; Zettler, Friedrich, & Hilbig, 2011), again highlighting that Machiavellians are committed to pursuing only their own goals and are strategic in doing so.

Machiavellians are also apt at forming political alliances and cultivating a charismatic image (Deluga, 2001). These are useful competencies because being able to form coalitions with other organizational members while keeping a charming facade adds to the effectiveness of followers' strategic behavior. Several studies focus on Machiavellians' use of behavioral influence tactics. Jonason, Slomski, and Partyka (2012) found that Machiavellianism was associated with an increased use of both hard tactics (e.g., threats and attempts at manipulation) and soft tactics (e.g., ingratiation, favor exchange, and compromise). Jonason and Webster (2012) found that Machiavellians favor the manipulation of others (see Table 1) and that they use the tactics of seduction and charm to do so (also see Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007). Again, this points to the idea that Machiavellians use whatever means they need to get their way. In getting their goals on the agenda or in making sure that they reach their strategic goals they use a host of influence tactics both on their leader and on other organizational members, and they are able to reach their goals through negotiation (Christie & Geis, 1970).

This would benefit such followers, for instance, in negotiations with their leaders on salary, promotions, and the acquisition of high-status roles. Machiavellians' successful behavior in strategic situations does not seem to stem from superior emotional intelligence, perspective taking or empathy, or emotion recognition; relationships with these variables are commonly found to be absent or negative (Austin et al., 2007; Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011). Notably, it seems that more intelligent Machiavellians tend to be particularly successful strategists because they have the ability to match their intentions (Spain et al., 2014).

Psychopathy

This applies equally to corporate psychopaths; they will often take risks where others would hesitate, and may well win big on occasions, but they care not for the consequences, for themselves or others, when their high-risk strategies fail.¹

Because they enjoy inflicting harm on others, psychopaths are often viewed as the most malevolent ones of the dark triad (Paulhus, 2014). They distinguish themselves from narcissists and Machiavellians by deficits in self-control (e.g., impulsivity, antisocial behavior) and affective experience (e.g., callousness, lack of empathy, feelings of guilt). They are characterized by a short-term focus, a penchant for lying to gain immediate rewards, social disinhibition, recklessness, fearlessness, and bold behavior (e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Interpersonally, they can be perceived as charismatic due to their impression-management skills (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010), but they often have antisocial tendencies and an erratic lifestyle (Hare, 1999).

Psychopathy and follower strategic behavior in the work context. In the workplace, psychopathic traits may have some adaptive outcomes for the psychopaths themselves, but they are often associated with maladaptive outcomes for other people in the organization (cf. O'Boyle et al., 2012). Surprisingly, although psychopaths have low regard for others and are more likely to engage in both organizational CWB and interpersonal CWB, they are often perceived as charismatic and as strategic thinkers (Babiak et al., 2010). So even when their behavior is at odds with being strategic, they are still perceived as such.

In terms of the dark triad, due to their impulsiveness psychopaths will likely succeed less often than narcissists and Machiavellians in using strategic follower behavior. However, that does not mean that they do not attempt to do so, and they can, under certain circumstances (e.g., organizational latitude, susceptible coworkers), be successful in using strategic behaviors even though their strategic decision making may be less elaborate. Particularly in high-velocity organizational environments or with a supervisor who approves of speedy action, their fast and bold decision making (Jones, 2014) might actually have some strategic value. For instance, high-velocity organizational environments are characterized by ideas such as "The worst decision is no decision at

¹ <http://www.remorselessfiction.com>

all,” “We’re aggressive. We make things happen,” and “Big opportunities go by if you don’t act quickly” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 550). In those environments psychopathic followers’ impulsiveness and their reluctance to take into account the consequences of their decisions for others may actually be rewarded (see also Table 1).

Their strong competitive orientation (Ryckman, Hammer, Kaczor, & Gold, 1990) and drive for dominance (Semenyna & Honey, 2015) predisposes followers scoring high on psychopathic traits to search for situations in which they can outperform others. Indeed, those with higher scores on psychopathic traits enjoy rivalry and pitting the strong against the weak (cf. Miner, 2006). Thus they are likely to make choices that not only make them look superior but also make others look inferior. Their strategic decision making in terms of the goals they pursue and the means they use to achieve these goals is further characterized by their ruthlessness. They are unlikely to consider the needs and wishes of others and are unafraid of crossing moral boundaries. For instance, Jones (2013) found that psychopathy was positively associated with gambling with someone else’s money (but not with one’s own money). This also suggests that psychopaths’ fearless, bold, and risky decisions may involve a big risk for others (but less so for themselves).

It has been argued that the prevalence of psychopathy, with numbers cited at 4% (Babiak & Hare, 2006), is higher in top positions than in the general population. Hence, followers with psychopathic traits must do something right in strategic terms to be able to climb the hierarchical ladder successfully. On one hand, this could be due to psychopathic followers’ desire and motivation to gain more power and a higher salary (cf. Boddy, 2011c). On the other hand, in some cases, the qualities of psychopathic individuals align well with the vision and mission of the organizations they work in, providing them a strategic advantage.

O’Boyle and colleagues (2012) discussed, for example, that psychopaths are likely to thrive in organizations that require a rational and emotionless behavioral style, a strong achievement focus, a willingness to take risks, and a charismatic appearance (see also DePaulo, 2010; Yang & Raine, 2008). Even the antisocial and rule-breaking tendencies of those with higher psychopathy scores may reflect well on them when these tendencies are perceived by others as questioning the status quo instead of being rooted in self-interested motives. In a similar vein, their focus on immediate rewards may lead to a lack of

loyalty to their supervisors and a questioning of supervisors’ authority (Miner, 2006), causing them to ignore existing power structures. However, this may cause them to appear impressive rather than egotistical to coworkers who are dissatisfied with a supervisor. Hence, especially when others are unsatisfied with the situation and/or the leader, followers with higher psychopathic traits may seize the opportunity to break rules and question the status quo while gaining recognition from others.

Another strategic behavior psychopaths may display is distracting the attention of others away from their own personal agendas. By creating chaos in the organization, as well as in coworkers’ personal lives, they can pursue personal agendas without detection (cf. Boddy, 2011a; Cohen, 2016). They not only enjoy hurting people; they strategically use humiliation and bullying to direct other people’s attention away from their hidden selfish activities (Clarke, 2005; Hare, 1999). Other ways to direct coworkers’ attention away from the task at hand is to lure them into an erratic lifestyle (going out often and/or substance abuse) or seduce them into starting a (short-term) romantic relationship. Previous research has also suggested that psychopaths may engage in counterproductive work behaviors as a means to distract coworkers from their work and to pursue their own goals (Wu & LeBreton, 2011; see also Table 1). Hence, psychopaths’ typical weaknesses, such as their impulsivity, risky decision making, lack of regard for others, and disrespect for authority figures, may emerge under certain conditions as strategic strengths.

THE ROLE OF THE LEADER AND THE CONTEXT IN STRATEGIC FOLLOWER BEHAVIOR

We have so far focused on individual behaviors that dark triad personalities use to pursue their own goals. Now we turn to the question of how leaders and the organizational context can foster or reduce the occurrence of negative strategic behaviors of dark triad followers. The notion that followers, leaders, and context together determine the extent to which certain behaviors are likely to surface has been discussed by Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007). In their toxic triangle model, the characteristics of the leaders, followers, and environmental context together determine whether destructive organizational behavior takes place. For instance, people with a predisposition to act in a destructive manner are more likely to act accordingly when the context is conducive to such behaviors and when other

individuals (e.g., leaders) provide them with the opportunity to display destructive behaviors. When the context and others are less permissive, individuals' destructive tendencies may be reined in more easily. In fact, drawing on trait expression theory (Christiansen & Tett, 2008), we argue that while a trait is unlikely to change, the ways in which and the frequency with which it is expressed can be altered. Thus, rather than trying to change the traits of followers, the focus should be on how to change the manifestation of the trait. In terms of strategic follower behavior, therefore, the issue is how the leader and/or the context can affect the expression of dark triad traits in followers.

Leadership Styles

Previous research has explicitly considered two leadership styles in the discussion about curbing the negative behaviors of dark triad employees. Specifically, it has been argued that transformational leadership can stimulate Machiavellian followers to engage in positive strategic behavior (contributing ideas, taking initiative, and voicing issues) on behalf of the organization instead of themselves (Belschak, Den Hartog, & Kalshoven, 2015). In a related study, Belschak and colleagues (2015) showed that transformational leaders were able to increase Machiavellian followers' organizational citizenship behavior by providing them with more autonomy and enhancing their intrinsic motivation.

In addition to transformational leadership, ethical leadership is relevant for shady strategic follower behavior. Ethical leaders are honest, fair, caring, and principled individuals who communicate frequently with their followers about ethics, set clear ethical standards, and use rewards and punishments to regulate those standards (Brown & Treviño, 2006). By doing so, they may serve as proactive role models for ethical conduct. Indeed, research on so-called trickle-down models has demonstrated that the ethical tone at the top trickles down to lower levels in the organization, making the organization as a whole more ethical (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). Furthermore, by rewarding and punishing specific behaviors, ethical leaders may steer the strategic behavior of dark triad followers in a more positive direction, as dark triad personalities have been shown to be sensitive to rewards (Gray & McNaughton, 2000) and, at times, to punishments (Jonason & Jackson, 2016). Thus, transformational and ethical leadership may hinder the display of

unwanted or egocentric strategic behavior of dark triad followers.

Leader Power

The influence of leadership on strategic follower behavior is, however, also likely to depend on the actual power a leader has. A leader's power can influence how much he or she can manage dark triad followers and address their strategic behavior. For example, if leaders do not have reward or punishment power, they are likely to find it more difficult to mitigate dark triad follower behavior. To do so, they would have to make a case to their own supervisors rather than being able to react directly. We assume that dark triad followers thrive in a context where their own direct leaders have little power, and this lack of leader power can add to the breadth of strategic behavior they can and will use.

Leader Traits and Values

At the same time, leaders' personalities and values might make them vulnerable to the influence of strategic follower behavior and add to the extent to which the strategic behavior of dark triad followers is displayed. For example, leaders with an unclear self-concept, low self-esteem, and/or a strong preference for being liked may be vulnerable to the strategic actions of followers with higher scores on dark triad traits and may be unable to ward off such behaviors (Thoroughgood et al., 2012). Leaders may also actively choose to provide opportunities for the self-interested strategic behaviors of dark triad followers. They may think that they increase their chances for personal gain by doing so, or they may do so because they share congruent values and goals (Thoroughgood et al., 2012).

The possibility of sharing congruent values raises the question of what happens when dark triad followers are supervised by dark triad leaders. While a positive impact on work behaviors of similar personalities is likely for some traits, such as conscientiousness (e.g., Antonioni & Park, 2001), for other traits dissimilarity can be more advantageous in the work context (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). The effects of similarity in leader and follower dark triad traits might also depend on the specific traits. As only one person can be in the limelight, narcissistic followers and leaders might clash (cf. Wisse et al., 2015), so narcissistic followers may find their strategic behavior obstructed by narcissistic leaders. When Machiavellian employees have Machiavellian leaders, their trust in the leader significantly decreases and

their level of stress significantly increases (Belschak, Muhammad, & Den Hartog, 2018). It would be interesting to see how that affects their (success in employing) strategic behaviors. Little is known about the combination of psychopathy in leaders and followers, but from literature on mate choices we know that psychopaths tend to flock together (Jonason, Lyons, & Blanchard, 2015); they apparently get something out of being close to other psychopaths. Organizations need to be aware of these interaction effects between leader and follower traits and leader and follower behavior to prevent strategic behavior from spiraling out of control.

Organizational Context

In terms of organizational context, several conditions can facilitate or hamper the strategic behavior of dark triad followers. Cohen (2016) argued that (perceived) accountability is relevant to mitigating the counterproductive behavior of dark triad employees, as it requires employees to justify their behavior (cf. the argument about checks and balances in Padilla et al., 2007). For example, Rus, Van Knippenberg, and Wisse (2012) found that accountability alleviates the effect of power on self-serving leader behavior, meaning that accountability puts constraints on the expression of behavior in the workplace.

In addition, Cohen argued that organizational ambiguity, which “often derives from the unclear articulation of required role expectations, work methods, or performance contingencies” (2016, p. 77), can stimulate dark triad trait expressions (also see Padilla et al., 2007). Neves and Schyns (2018) argued that change is a context that can foster negative behavior, as it is characterized by instability. That is, some processes in organizations are by their nature more conducive to the expression of negative behavior.

Furthermore, climate or culture (a set of meanings, assumptions, values, and norms that are shared within an organization; Schein, 1992) may affect the extent to which the dark triad traits of followers are reflected in their behavior. Cohen (2016) argued that an unethical climate sets norms that are in line with the behavior of dark triad followers (also see Boddy, 2011b). This is in line with our argument above that where leader and follower values are congruent, negative follower strategic behavior is more likely to manifest.

Finally, when followers have the freedom and discretion to act at will in the workplace—that is, when they have high job autonomy—they are in a better position to act in line with their dark triad

traits. From an empirical point of view, it is still unclear what happens when organizations provide followers with more job autonomy. Often, job autonomy can be seen as a double-edged sword. Indeed, as we discussed in the previous section, it has been shown that Machiavellian followers’ organizational citizenship behavior can be increased by providing them with more job autonomy (see Belschak et al., 2015), suggesting that autonomy does not need to add to the destructive influences of dark triad strategic behavior. However, autonomy may also facilitate negative strategic follower behavior. Feeling free to act at as one pleases and without the need to confer with others may stimulate followers to express their dark triad traits strategically.

Moral Reasoning Development in Dark Triad Followers

There is also some indication that organizations may want to pay specific attention to the development of moral reasoning in dark triad followers, especially because moral reasoning and ethical behavior are positively related (Blasi, 1980; Jones & Ryan, 1997). Campbell and colleagues (2009) conducted a study with monozygotic and same-sex dizygotic twins and found that differences in higher levels of moral cognition were entirely attributable to environmental factors (e.g., experiences, encounters) and not to genetic factors. Apparently, higher levels of moral reasoning can be developed through experiences, including in those scoring higher on dark triad traits.

One obvious way to develop moral reasoning is to educate people. A meta-analysis by Schlaefli, Rest, and Thoma (1985) showed that various types of intervention programs (group discussion of moral dilemmas, psychological development programs, social studies and humanities courses) effectively stimulate moral reasoning, that treatments of three to 12 weeks are optimal, and that programs for adults (24 years and older) produce larger effect sizes than those for younger individuals. These findings suggest that organizations could promote moral reasoning in dark triad followers by providing ethics training programs. Research on the extent to which higher moral reasoning actually translates to more ethical strategic behavior of dark triad followers is, however, needed.

FURTHER EXPLORING NEGATIVE STRATEGIC FOLLOWER BEHAVIOR

Hogan and Hogan (2001) stressed that organizational members’ dark personalities are related to

longer-term problems, but there is room for a more detailed discussion regarding the bright and dark sides (e.g., Sutton, 2007) of negative personality traits. We suggest that there are situations in which the strategic behavior of dark triad followers can be beneficial to the organization. Such situations may occur when the goals of dark triad followers are aligned with the goals of the organization. For instance, a narcissistic follower could step up to solve an immediate organizational crisis (cf. King, 2007), a Machiavellian follower could play an essential role in forming coalitions that benefit the organization, and a psychopathic follower could make or support a bold decision that fosters the organization's functioning or effectiveness.

An interesting discussion here would be around alignment of unethical goals. That is, dark triad followers are likely to have few issues with following unethical leader suggestions if they are in line with their own strategic goals or support an unethical climate. That means that even in situations where dark triad follower goals are aligned with organizational goals, the risk is that they result in wider negative implications for society. A useful concept to consider here is narcissistic organizational identification (Galvin, Lange, & Ashforth, 2015), which is defined as an "individual's tendency to see his/her identity as core to the definition of the organization" (Galvin et al., p. 163). While Galvin and colleagues mainly saw this identification as related to (narcissistic) people in power, they also acknowledged that narcissistic identification could apply to lower-level units in the organization (e.g., teams and departments), even when individuals are not in power positions.

We argue here that narcissistic identification is relevant also for followers, related to organizational subunits. This is especially likely as dark triad personalities tend to overestimate their abilities (for narcissism, see Ames & Kammrath, 2004) and thus likely how influential they are in their groups. Narcissistic identification can lead to a disregard for societal consequences for the (assumed) benefit of the organization and thus aggravates unethical organization behavior (Galvin et al., 2015). Ultimately, dark triad followers might even be attracted to and strive in unethical organizations.

We have so far looked at how dark triad traits may engender shady strategic behavior of individual followers. However, it would be interesting to consider the team context in this regard. Felps, Mitchell, and Byington (2006) offered a theoretical model explaining how, when, and why bad apples spoil the

barrel. Specifically, they discussed how the behaviors of one negative group member (such as Machiavellians can be) could have a powerful, detrimental influence on fellow team members and groups. They argued that the negative behaviors of one individual can elicit perceptions of inequity, negative feelings, and reduced trust in team members. These perceptions and feelings can, in turn, lead to defensive behavioral reactions (e.g., outbursts, mood maintenance, withdrawal) and negatively influence important group processes and outcomes (e.g., cooperation, creativity, performance).

Interestingly, there is the possibility that the behavior of dark triad followers can have a contagious effect (similar to mood contagion; Barsade, 2002) on team members, meaning that other team members might mimic or copy the negative strategic behaviors of dark triad followers. Seeing others act antisocially makes those behaviors more mentally accessible and lowers inhibitions about behaving in a similar fashion. This process is described in Bandura's (e.g., 1997) vicarious learning, where similar others can serve as behavioral models. Contagion processes may be more likely when team members do not observe negative consequences of the displayed behavior, see that dark triad followers benefit from their use, or come to believe that such behaviors are normal and in line with the company code of conduct. One can easily imagine, for example, that organizational citizenship behaviors diminish rapidly in teams that have dark triad members, as those team members are unlikely to help others except for their own benefit.

At the same time, team members can guard themselves against contagion if they (a) are less easily influenced by their coworkers (e.g., because they have higher self-esteem, are more resilient, or have better coping skills), (b) create a culture in which selfish acts are punished, and (c) work toward a more independent task structure (that is, if their work is less influenced by team members high in dark triad traits; see Felps et al., 2006; Thoroughgood et al., 2012). Notably, team members themselves may not have, or feel as if they have, the power needed to change work context conditions to respond to a negative member. This may be very frustrating and intensify the reactions to bad apple behavior. In such cases group members may look to their leader to punish a deviant group member (Butterfield, Trevino, & Ball, 1996; Felps et al., 2006).

Finally, as pointed out above, dark triad traits are overlapping yet unique. One could pose the question of how a combination of these traits—people scoring high on two or more of the dark triad traits (e.g., a

narcissistic psychopath)—would affect strategic behavior. Of course, combinations of dark triad traits are possible, but it is important to note that high scores on any one of the three traits are already uncommon (i.e., scores on dark triad traits are typically positively skewed; see, e.g., Stead, Fekken, Kay, & McDermott, 2012), and that therefore a combination of high scores on multiple dark triad traits is even less likely to occur. Nonetheless, we think it would be interesting to investigate how various combinations of dark triad traits would affect strategic behavior, especially because the negative impact of any of the traits may be intensified by the co-occurrence with one of the others.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we investigated how dark triad personality traits affect strategic follower behavior. We described how follower narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy may stimulate (pro-)active, self-serving, goal-oriented behavior. For each dark triad trait, we identified the red-flag behaviors that organizations should beware of, and we indicated what can be done to curb the destructive influences of dark triad followers. We hope that our considerations are helpful for organizations to address dark triad strategic follower behavior.

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Birgit Schyns (birgit.schyns@neoma-bs.fr) is a professor of organizational behavior at the Neoma Business School in Mont-Saint-Aignan, France. Her research focus is leadership, particularly the follower side of leadership and the dark side of leadership. She has edited several special issues and four books, and was an associate editor for *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* (till 2011) and the *British Journal of Management* (till 2013)

and is currently associate editor for *Applied Psychology: An International Review*. She also serves on several editorial boards.

Barbara Wisse is a professor of organizational behavior and leadership processes at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and chair in the management department at Durham University in England. Her work focuses explicitly on power and leadership processes and often includes topics such as ethics, emotions, dark triad personality traits, and the psychological effects of change.

Stacey Sanders is a teacher at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. She received her Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Groningen in 2015. Her research focuses on emotions and (un)ethical leadership.

