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Moderators and mediators in the relationship between Dark Triad traits and organizational outcomes: a systematic literature review

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This systematic literature review examines how Dark Triad traits – Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy – translate into workplace behaviors through individual and contextual mechanisms. Drawing on Trait Activation Theory (TAT), the review synthesizes empirical evidence on moderators and mediators influencing the relationship between these traits and organizational outcomes. Following PRISMA guidelines, searches of Scopus and Web of Science identified nine peer-reviewed empirical studies that met inclusion criteria. A hybrid thematic analysis revealed three main themes: organizational and individual moderators shaping the expression of Dark Triad traits, mediating mechanisms linking traits to behavioral outcomes, and resulting organizational consequences. Contextual cues such as performance climate, abusive supervision, and competitive or deceptive environments were found to amplify maladaptive behaviors, whereas mastery climates, rule enforcement, and psychological safety mitigated their effects. Mediators including self-serving behavior, felt responsibility for constructive change, and person-environment misfit explained how dark traits can lead to either destructive or, under certain conditions, adaptive outcomes. While the activation of these traits frequently resulted in exploitative leadership, counterproductive work behavior, and emotional exhaustion, narcissism was sometimes associated with proactive, change-oriented behaviors in uncertain contexts. Overall, the findings highlight the contingent and context-dependent nature of dark personality expression at work, extending TAT by demonstrating how situational cues influence both the intensity and direction of behavioral outcomes. These results underscore the importance of ethical, psychologically safe organizational climates for mitigating dysfunctional leadership and provide directions for future research on the activation of dark traits in professional settings.

KEYWORDS

Dark Triad, organizational outcomes, systematic literature review, toxic work environment, trait activation theory

1 Introduction

In recent years, research on personality traits has gained considerable attention within organizational psychology. Under the Dark Triad researchers grouped three traits that are commonly linked to a range of maladaptive workplace behaviors, including abusive supervision, bullying, and counterproductive work practices (Paulhus and Williams, 2002; O'Boyle et al., 2012). These traits are: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Early

studies often treated such traits as fixed dispositional tendencies, assuming that individuals high in Machiavellianism or psychopathy would inevitably engage in destructive behavior. More recent research, challenges this view and emphasizes that personality expression depends on the surrounding environment and situational cues (Grijalva and Newman, 2015; Tett and Burnett, 2003).

In organizational settings, the behavioral effects of dark personality traits can differ depending on the climate. In highly competitive or performance-driven workplaces, manipulative or self-serving behaviors may be tolerated, or even rewarded, as part of the pursuit of results. In contrast, environments that emphasize ethics, collaboration, or mastery tend to discourage such tendencies (Schmid et al., 2019). Interpersonal factors also play a crucial role, the quality of leader–member exchange, exposure to abusive supervision, or the presence of political behavior within teams can either intensify or buffer the influence of these traits (Baloch et al., 2017). Gaining a clearer understanding of when dark traits lead to destructive vs. potentially adaptive behaviors is essential for gaining both theoretical insight and practical management strategies.

Some past research has linked the Dark Triad traits to unfavorable organizational outcomes, but at the same time we still know relatively little about the mechanisms that determine how and under what conditions these effects unfold. Recent studies have started to explore both moderators, contextual or individual factors that alter the strength or direction of an effect, and mediators, referring to the psychological or behavioral pathways through which these traits operate. However, the existing findings remain scattered making it difficult to draw a coherent picture of how dark traits are activated and expressed at work. Some studies point to contextual influences such as leadership approaches or the broader organizational climate (De Hoogh et al., 2021; Braun et al., 2025), while others focus on internal dynamics, including self-serving tendencies, perceived misfit, or a reduced sense of responsibility for change (Lang et al., 2022; Yi and Zhang, 2025). So far, there has been no comprehensive effort to bring these strands together into an integrated conceptual framework. No study has systematically synthesized the role of moderators and mediators linking Dark Triad traits to organizational outcomes.

This systematic literature review seeks to fill this gap by synthesizing empirical and theoretical research on the moderators and mediators of the relationship between Dark Triad traits and organizational outcomes. Specifically, it aims to address two research questions:

RQ1: What contextual and personal factors moderate or mediate the relationship between Dark Triad traits and workplace outcomes?

RQ2: What are the main consequences of Dark Triad traits for individuals and organizations?

Clarifying these mechanisms is crucial for both scholarship and practice. Individuals high in Dark Triad traits often display manipulative, exploitative, or unethical behaviors that can undermine trust, cooperation, and psychological safety (Spain et al., 2014; Babiak and Hare, 2006). However, in other situations, certain traits—such as boldness or charisma—may contribute to leadership effectiveness, goal attainment, or innovation. These behaviors can influence workplace climates, turnover, and performance, with

effects that may be either detrimental or occasionally beneficial depending on context and organizational conditions (Braun, 2017; O’Boyle et al., 2012). Understanding how and when such effects occur can inform the development of interventions in leadership training, organizational design, and talent management, helping to reduce dysfunctional dynamics and promote healthier work environments.

2 Theoretical background

Trait Activation Theory (TAT) provides a dynamic framework for understanding how stable personality traits are expressed in specific contexts. It was introduced by Tett and Burnett (2003), and it posits that traits are latent dispositions that become behaviorally expressed only when relevant situational cues are present. Individuals are more likely to display trait-consistent behaviors when their environment provides cues that make those behaviors appropriate, expected, or rewarded.

In this literature review the author focuses on the organizational context as an environment where a variety of situational cues can activate or inhibit personality traits. Organizational features such as leadership style, reward systems, team norms, and formal policies can influence whether certain behaviors are expressed (Barrick et al., 2013). For example, in a highly competitive organization with strong performance pressures, cues may encourage assertive, strategic, or even manipulative behaviors, whereas ethical codes, transparent procedures, and collaborative norms may constrain such tendencies. By defining the organizational context in this way, TAT emphasizes that traits are not expressed in isolation, but emerge from the interaction between individual dispositions and situational cues present in the work environment.

TAT is building on the person–situation interactionist tradition approach in personality psychology (Mischel, 1977). What is new is that it integrates dispositional and situational perspectives. Unlike traditional trait theories focusing solely on stable intra-individual characteristics, TAT highlights the significant role of contextual triggers in shaping behavioral expression, whether adaptive or maladaptive. This perspective is helpful in explaining why specific traits manifest in particular job settings, roles, or leadership situations (Tett and Burnett, 2003; Judge and Zapata, 2015).

The Dark Triad comprising Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, represents a cluster of socially aversive personality traits that are very relevant for organizational settings. While these traits are distinct, they share core features such as callousness, manipulateness, and a tendency to prioritize self-interest over collective goals (Paulhus and Williams, 2002; O’Boyle et al., 2012). Machiavellianism involves strategic manipulation and long-term goal-oriented exploitation, narcissism is characterized by grandiosity and entitlement, and psychopathy includes impulsivity, emotional coldness, and risk-taking. These traits are not uniformly expressed. Their behavioral manifestation is influenced by situational and contextual factors, aligning closely with TAT principles. Among organizational predictors we can also highlight individual factors such as low agreeableness, low conscientiousness,

high impulsivity, and a strong need for dominance or control to increase the likelihood of Dark Triad expression (following the Big Five theory).

Organizational environments are rich with cues that can activate or buffer dark personality traits. For instance, competitive and high-pressure work climates may trigger traits related to dominance, ambition, or manipulateness, while ethical and cooperative environments may suppress expressions of traits associated with exploitation or interpersonal callousness. Research also suggests that specific organizational contexts, especially those characterized by toxic leadership, high autonomy without accountability, political behavior, or a lack of ethical oversight, function as catalysts for dark trait activation (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Schmid et al., 2019). In such environments, individuals with elevated dark traits may feel freer to manipulate, exploit, or dominate others without fear of repercussion. On the other hand, in highly ethical, transparent, and prosocial contexts, these individuals may inhibit dark tendencies due to normative constraints and social sanctions. Understanding this interaction between personality and context challenges the popular notion that dark traits invariably lead to toxic behaviors. Instead, as TAT implies, the same personality trait can manifest in different behavioral outcomes depending on environmental cues. For example, a narcissistic leader may exhibit charisma and motivation in a context that rewards innovation and visibility but display entitlement and arrogance in cultures lacking checks and balances (Neuvicka et al., 2011).

In summary, Trait Activation Theory offers a theoretically grounded, context-sensitive lens through which to examine the activation of dark traits in organizational settings. It bridges individual predispositions and organizational behavior, helping to explain when and why certain personality traits manifest in harmful workplace outcomes. Given the serious consequences of dark trait activation, including abusive supervision, counterproductive behaviors, and emotional harm to employees, a deeper understanding of TAT in this area is necessary (Tett and Burnett, 2003; Uçan and Avci, 2023; Carter et al., 2024).

3 Method

This systematic literature review (SLR) follows a transparent research protocol to ensure objectivity, replicability, and comprehensive coverage of the literature on the role of organizational context in activating Dark Triad traits. Unlike traditional narrative literature reviews, SLRs apply explicit, structured, and replicable procedures to identify and synthesize existing studies. This approach helps to reduce bias and increase the reliability of conclusions (Weed, 2005; Tranfield et al., 2003).

3.1 First stage: planning the SLR

Published studies were identified through searches of electronic databases accessible through the author university system. Databases included in this review are: Scopus, Web of Science. The searches for published studies were conducted in a systematic manner, following the order of the listed databases.

TABLE 1 Search strategy: databases, boolean operators, and keyword strings.

Database	Search string
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("Dark Triad" OR Machiavellianism OR narcissism OR psychopathy) AND ("Trait Activation Theory" OR "trait activation") AND (leadership OR "organizational context" OR workplace)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "re")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (OA, "all"))
Web of Science	((TI=("Dark Triad" OR Machiavellianism OR narcissism OR psychopathy) OR AB=("Dark Triad" OR Machiavellianism OR narcissism OR psychopathy)) AND (TI=("Trait Activation Theory" OR "trait activation") OR AB=("Trait Activation Theory" OR "trait activation"))) AND (TI=(leadership OR "organizational context" OR workplace) OR AB=(leadership OR "organizational context" OR workplace))) AND LA=(English) AND DT=(Article)

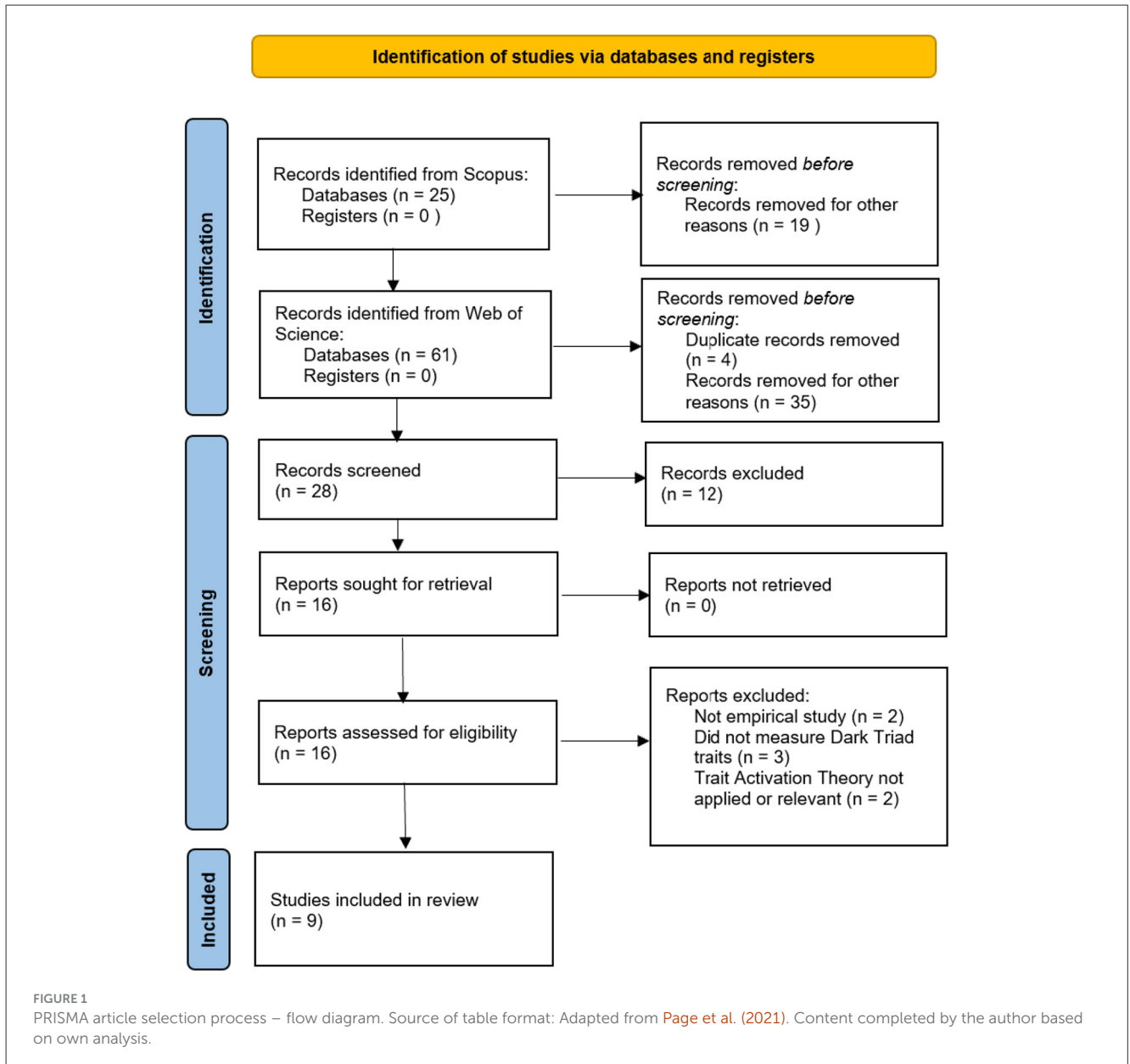
Source: own elaboration.

3.2 Second stage: defining inclusion and exclusion criteria

The literature search was carried out between 12 September and 22 October 2025. To ensure the relevance and quality of the studies included in this review, the author established clear inclusion and exclusion criteria prior to the search process. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they met the following conditions: (a) were published in a peer-reviewed journal (article or review article); (b) were written in English; (c) presented original empirical research (as indicated in the abstract); (d) were available through open access; and (e) contained at least one of the predefined keyword combinations related to the Dark Triad traits (e.g., Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy) and organizational variables (e.g., leadership, workplace, organizational context), as well as references to Trait Activation Theory or trait activation; (f) reported on working adult populations, including employees, managers, and leaders; and (g) were conducted in organizational or workplace contexts, ensuring relevance to professional settings. Only open-access articles were included in this review to ensure transparency and facilitate replicability. It is acknowledged, however, that this approach may limit the completeness of the evidence base and introduce potential biases, as relevant studies behind paywalls are excluded. The exact Boolean operators and keyword strings applied during the search process are presented in Table 1.

3.3 Third stage: study selection and screening

Given the relatively narrow and specific search criteria applied in both databases, a small number of articles was identified. To illustrate the article selection process, a flow diagram (Figure 1) was developed. This diagram outlines the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied at each stage and follows the methodological recommendations of Almeida and Goulart (2017) and Tranfield et al. (2003). The aim of using such a structured approach was to enhance transparency, support systematic decision-making throughout the review process, and reduce potential bias by clearly



documenting how theoretical and empirical studies were screened and assessed (Figure 1).

The initial search was conducted in the Scopus database using the specified keywords, which yielded 25 results; however, after applying the open access filter, this number was reduced to 6. A parallel search in the Web of Science database returned 61 results, which narrowed down to 26 after the same open access filter was applied. These filtering steps ensured the selection of accessible publications aligned with the study's inclusion criteria.

Next, four duplicate records were identified and removed. Based on abstract screening, keyword analysis, and the predefined inclusion criteria, an additional 12 articles were excluded. This process resulted in 16 potentially relevant studies. After full-text review, 7 articles were excluded for not meeting the empirical or topical relevance criteria, yielding a final sample of 9 empirical studies for in-depth analysis.

To better understand the disciplinary focus of the selected literature, the journals were grouped by field. The largest number of studies was concentrated in leadership ($n = 4$), followed by organizational psychology ($n = 3$) and business ($n = 2$).

3.4 Fourth stage: data extraction and analysis

In the fourth stage of the systematic literature review, a structured data extraction and analysis process was carried out to synthesize relevant information from the included studies. A data extraction table (Table 2) was developed to capture key characteristics of each article, including authorship, publication year, methodology, sample size, targeted Dark Triad traits, and key

TABLE 2 Overview of included studies: methodology, samples, dark triad traits, and key variables.

Author(s)	Approach	Sample	Dark Triad traits	Source of report	Key variables
Lazreg and Lakhali (2022)	Quantitative (cross sectional)	300	Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy	self-report	Exploitative leadership, political skill, deceptive situations, DT traits
Zagenczyk et al. (2017)	Quantitative (longitudinal) 2 studies	262	Narcissism	self-report	Narcissism, Psychological Contract Violation, exit and neglect
Lang et al. (2022)	Quantitative (cross sectional) 2 studies	514	Narcissism	self-report	Narcissism, Felt Responsibility for Constructive Change, Environmental Uncertainty (COVID-19 context)
Braun et al. (2025)	Quantitative (cross sectional)	2264	Narcissism	self-report and observer-report	Leader narcissism, Performance climate, Mastery climate, Leader self-serving behavior
Sun et al. (2024)	Quantitative (cross sectional)	236	Machiavellianism	self-report	Machiavellianism; Mediator: Relational Energy; Moderators: Social Support, Social Pressure (as trait activation cues)
Uçan and Avci (2023)	Quantitative (longitudinal)	521	Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy	self-report	Abusive supervision, Dark Triad traits, Organizational gossip
De Hoogh et al. (2021)	Quantitative (cross sectional) 2 studies	952	Machiavellianism	self-report and observer-report	Machiavellianism, abusive supervision, organizational climate (rules & instrumental)
Carter et al. (2024)	Quantitative (cross sectional) 3 studies	1460	Psychopathy	self-report	Psychopathy, Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB); Relationship conflict, Abusive supervision
Yi and Zhang (2025)	Quantitative (longitudinal) 3 studies	275	Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy	self-report	Dark Triad traits, Perceived Psychological Safety (PPS) Supply-Need Misfit (SN) Demand-Ability Misfit (DA) Low Psychological Safety (niski PPS) Achievement Goal Orientation (AGO)

variables. This facilitated a transparent and consistent comparison across studies.

In parallel, the methodological quality and potential risk of bias of the included articles were systematically assessed using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Tools (Jordan et al., 2019), with the choice of checklist tailored to the specific design of each study. Among the included studies, six employed a quantitative cross-sectional design and were evaluated using the JBI checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies, while three studies followed a longitudinal design and were assessed with the JBI checklist for Cohort Studies. Based on this systematic appraisal, all included articles met the established methodological criteria, indicating that the overall quality of the studies was satisfactory and supporting the reliability of the final results.

These two procedures—data extraction and critical appraisal—ensured a rigorous foundation for synthesizing theoretical and empirical insights, in line with established best practices for evidence-based reviews (Kolaski et al., 2023).

3.5 Fifth stage: synthesis and reporting of results - hybrid thematic analysis

This stage aimed to integrate and interpret key findings from the included studies to address the research questions guiding this review. The synthesis was organized around two primary research questions. (1) What contextual and personal factors contribute to the emergence and behavioral expression of Dark Triad traits in workplace settings? (2) What are

the effects of Dark Triad traits on workplace outcomes? To rigorously analyze and synthesize the diverse findings across studies, a qualitative hybrid thematic analysis was conducted. This method was chosen due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within complex qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data were initially coded by systematically identifying meaningful segments related to organizational factors, moderators, mediators, and behavioral outcomes. These initial codes were then examined and grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarities and theoretical relevance. Next, from these categories, overarching themes were developed to capture key patterns and recurrent phenomena across the included studies. This iterative process involved multiple rounds of review and refinement to enhance the reliability and validity of the themes, ensuring a robust and nuanced synthesis. The key themes and illustrative codes extracted from the included studies are presented in Appendix Table A1.

The hybrid thematic analysis resulted in three overarching themes that organize the synthesis of findings across the reviewed studies. These themes emerged through a combination of inductive coding and deductive structuring, informed by the research questions and the underlying theoretical framework. Themes represent the core dimensions of Trait Activation Theory as applied to Dark Triad traits in leadership contexts: (I) organizational and individual moderators that influence the strength and direction of trait-behavior relationships (II) mediating mechanisms that explain how traits are translated into specific outcomes, and (III) observed organizational consequences of activated Dark Triad traits.

The inclusion of certain constructs as both mediators and moderators reflects heterogeneity in theoretical frameworks and analytical approaches across the reviewed studies rather than conceptual inconsistency. In organizational research, the role of a variable as a mediator or moderator is model-dependent and determined by the assumed causal structure rather than by the construct itself. Consequently, the same construct may function as a mediator in one study (explaining how Dark Triad traits influence outcomes) and as a moderator in another (indicating when or for whom these effects are strengthened or attenuated).

3.5.1 Moderators that influence the strength and direction of trait-behavior relationships

Although Dark Triad traits are relatively stable personality dispositions, their behavioral expression in the workplace varies across different contexts. Research suggests that individual, interpersonal, and organizational moderators influence whether and how these traits manifest in various behaviors, which can range from assertive or strategic actions to harmful behaviors such as abusive supervision or unethical decision-making (Spain et al., 2014; O'Boyle et al., 2012). Trait Activation Theory (Tett and Burnett, 2003) proposes that traits are expressed when situational cues signal opportunities or constraints relevant to those traits. Understanding these moderators is therefore crucial for explaining variability in outcomes associated with Dark Triad traits and for identifying conditions under which interventions may reduce potential negative effects.

3.5.1.1 Political skill

Political skill represents an individual-level factor that can shape the strength of trait-behavior relationships. It refers to a person's capacity to read social situations, understand others, and use this insight to influence them in ways that advance personal or organizational goals (Ahearn et al., 2004). In their study, Lazreg and Lakhali (2022) found that political skill does not operate uniformly across the dark traits but instead differentiates between psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism. Their results show that political skill significantly attenuates the relationship between psychopathy and exploitative leadership—psychopathic managers high in political skill were notably less likely to engage in exploitative behaviors, whereas those low in political skill showed a strong positive association with exploitation ($\beta_{\text{low}} = 0.857, p < 0.001$; $\beta_{\text{high}} = 0.424, p = 0.002$). This pattern suggests that political skill provides psychopathic individuals with the social competence and impression-management capacity needed to restrain the impulsive, callous, and manipulative tendencies that would otherwise manifest in exploitative actions. A comparable moderating pattern emerged for Machiavellianism, though only among those high in political skill. No significant effect was observed for narcissism, implying that political skill may neither buffer nor intensify its behavioral expression in the same manner. Overall, these results indicate that political skill can function as a buffering mechanism, allowing darker traits to surface in more calculated or socially acceptable ways.

3.5.1.2 Perceived deceptive situations

Perceived deceptive situations, conceptualized as employees' subjective perceptions that their work environment contains cues of mistrust, manipulation, or deceit, represent a situational factor that may influence how Dark Triad traits manifest in leadership behaviors. In line with Rauthmann, Gallardo-Pujol, Guillaume, Todd, Nave and Sherman (2014) DIAMONDS situational taxonomy, deception refers to the perceived presence of misleading or untrustworthy cues in the situation rather than a globally "hostile" context. Lazreg and Lakhali (2022) operationalized this construct using managers' ratings of perceived deceptive situations and demonstrated that these perceptions moderated the relationship between psychopathy and exploitative leadership. Specifically, psychopathy was more strongly associated with exploitative leadership under conditions of high perceived deception, suggesting that psychopathic tendencies may be activated when individuals perceive others as deceptive or untrustworthy. Interestingly, the relationship between Machiavellianism and exploitative leadership was significant only when perceived deception was low, indicating that Machiavellian individuals may enact their strategic and calculated influence more readily in contexts they perceive as predictable and not already defined by deception. No significant moderating effect was observed for narcissism, implying that its link with exploitative leadership may be less contingent on deceptive situational cues. Together, these findings highlight that subjective perceptions of deception, rather than broad or objective assessments of the environment, play a critical role in determining when and how dark personality traits translate into destructive leadership behaviors.

3.5.1.3 Psychological contract violation

One important moderator of the relationship between employee narcissism and turnover intentions identified in empirical research is psychological contract violation. Psychological contract violation refers to employees' perceptions that the organization has failed to fulfill its implicit promises and is experienced affectively as anger, frustration, or betrayal (Rousseau, 1995). In their study, Zagenczyk et al. (2017) found that psychological contract violation strengthened the positive relationship between employees' narcissistic traits and their turnover intentions. Specifically, narcissism significantly predicted turnover intentions only among individuals experiencing high violation ($t = 3.74, p < 0.001$), but not among those experiencing low violation ($t = 0.457, p = 0.678$). This indicates that when employees perceive broken promises or unfair treatment, those high in narcissism are especially likely to consider leaving the organization. Importantly, while turnover is sometimes framed as a withdrawal behavior, it may also constitute an adaptive, self-protective response when individuals perceive the employment relationship as irreparably damaged. Thus, psychological contract violation functions as a contextual moderator that activates or intensifies the expression of narcissistic tendencies, heightening employees' likelihood of pursuing exit in response to perceived relational harm. Interestingly, although the degree of psychological contract violation moderated the relationship between narcissism and exit, it did not significantly moderate the relationship between narcissism and neglect. This nuance suggests that narcissistic employees who feel wronged are more inclined to engage in

active forms of withdrawal, such as exploring or pursuing exit opportunities, rather than passive disengagement. One interpretation offered in the literature is that neglect—a passive reduction in effort—may be less consistent with narcissists' self-concept, which is tied to maintaining a sense of competence, status, and superiority. Active withdrawal, by contrast, allows narcissistic individuals to protect their self-image by seeking alternative contexts where they anticipate greater recognition and affirmation. Consequently, psychological contract violation appears to amplify narcissistic employees' propensity toward active, self-enhancing withdrawal (i.e., exit), but does not similarly intensify passive neglect.

3.5.1.4 Environmental uncertainty

Environmental uncertainty refers to the unpredictability and rapid changes in external conditions that affect organizations, such as technological shifts, market fluctuations, or crises (Duncan, 1972; Milliken, 1987). In Lang et al.'s (2022) study, environmental uncertainty specifically described the technological uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which heavily impacted high-tech firms. The authors examined how this uncertainty affects the relationship between narcissism and employees' proactive change-oriented behaviors (change-oriented Organizational Citizenship Behavior, OCB). Their results showed that under high technological uncertainty, employees with higher narcissism experienced a stronger Felt Responsibility for Constructive Change (FRCC), which mediated their increased engagement in proactive behaviors to initiate positive organizational changes. Thus, the COVID-19-related technological uncertainty context amplified the effect of narcissistic traits on behaviors that support organizational adaptation and improvement.

The authors suggest that the positive relationship between narcissism and change-oriented behaviors may stem from narcissists' strong need for recognition and admiration. Engaging in proactive, change-focused actions allows narcissistic employees to gain attention and approval from others, thereby reinforcing their self-esteem and social status. This motivation can lead to beneficial outcomes for the organization, especially in uncertain contexts where such behaviors support adaptation and innovation.

3.5.1.5 Performance climate

Performance climate is an organizational environment that emphasizes individual superiority, competition, and outperforming others as criteria for success (Nerstad et al., 2013). This climate serves as an important contextual cue that can activate and amplify narcissistic tendencies in leaders, encouraging self-serving and egocentric behaviors (Grijalva and Zhang, 2016; Zhang et al., 2022). In such climates, narcissistic leaders feel justified in displaying dominance and pursuing their own interests, which can negatively impact followers' trust and organizational functioning (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau, 1998). Empirical findings by Braun et al. (2025) confirm that leader narcissism is positively related to self-serving behavior when the performance climate is high. Moreover, under these conditions, narcissistic leaders are more likely to erode follower trust through their self-serving actions. In contrast, when the performance climate is low, the relationship between narcissism and self-serving behavior becomes non-significant, indicating that

a less competitive context may buffer the harmful effects of narcissistic traits.

3.5.1.6 Mastery climate

Mastery climate is characterized by an organizational focus on collaboration, learning, and shared success rather than competition (Nerstad et al., 2013). In such environments, success is defined through collective improvement and mutual support, which discourages self-serving and egocentric behaviors typically associated with narcissistic leaders (Nerstad et al., 2018). Because mastery climates prioritize cooperation and knowledge sharing, they tend to suppress or "smother" the expression of Dark Triad traits by signaling that narcissistic behaviors are ineffective or inappropriate. This, in turn, fosters higher levels of trust between leaders and followers, which is essential for effective leadership and positive organizational functioning (Burke et al., 2007; Dirks and de Jong, 2022). Braun et al. (2025) found that leader narcissism was unrelated to self-serving behavior when the mastery climate was high, suggesting that the cooperative and egalitarian nature of such climates mitigates narcissistic expressions. Conversely, when the mastery climate was low, indicating a lack of shared learning and collaboration, narcissistic leaders were more likely to engage in self-serving behavior, resulting in diminished follower trust. These findings underscore the protective role of mastery climates in buffering the negative effects of narcissistic leadership.

3.5.1.7 Perceived psychological safety

Perceived Psychological Safety (PPS) emerged as a significant organizational moderator shaping how Dark Triad traits manifest in workplace behavior. In a study by Yi and Zhang (2025), PPS—defined as an individual's subjective sense of security in taking interpersonal risks, voicing concerns, or admitting mistakes—was shown to buffer the relationship between external hires' dark personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) and their perceptions of person–environment misfit. Specifically, the associations between Dark Triad traits and both supply–need (SN) and demand–ability (DA) misfit were significantly weaker among individuals reporting high levels of PPS, and stronger among those experiencing low perceived safety.

It is important to note that perceived psychological safety is not equivalent to actual psychological safety within the work environment. PPS reflects employees' subjective interpretations of the climate, which may or may not align with objective organizational practices or norms. Nevertheless, these perceptions are theoretically meaningful because individuals' behavioral responses, and the activation of dark traits, tend to be driven more by how safe they feel than by the objectively intended environment (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017). Thus, even if the broader climate is supportive, employees who perceive low safety may still experience higher activation of maladaptive cognitive and behavioral tendencies. Conversely, high perceived safety may inhibit such activation, thereby reducing the likelihood of downstream deviant behaviors, irrespective of the actual conditions.

3.5.1.8 Achievement goal orientation

Achievement Goal Orientation (AGO) has been explored as an individual difference that may shape how Dark Triad traits

influence workplace outcomes. Yi and Zhang (2025) found that AGO, defined as a personal drive to surpass previous achievements and continually improve, was positively associated with perceived demand–ability misfit ($\beta = 0.272, p < 0.05$). However, AGO did not significantly moderate the relationship between personality traits and supply–need misfit, as the AGO \times psychological safety interaction on SN was non-significant ($\beta = -0.008, p = 0.880$). In contrast, the AGO \times psychological safety interaction on demand–ability misfit was significant and negative ($\beta = -0.154, p = 0.004$), indicating that psychological safety attenuated the impact of AGO on DA perceptions. Thus, while AGO can amplify maladaptive outcomes in contexts involving ability demands, its moderating role does not extend to supply–need misfit, where organizational resource constraints appear less responsive to AGO-driven motivations.

3.5.1.9 Relationship conflict with coworkers

Relationship conflict with coworkers refers to interpersonal incompatibilities characterized by tension, animosity, and negative affect arising from personal disagreements rather than task-related issues (Jehn, 1995). In the study by Carter et al. (2024), relationship conflict is conceptualized not merely as a background stressor but as a trait-relevant social cue that activates psychopathic tendencies in line with Trait Activation Theory. Specifically, the authors demonstrate that relationship conflict strengthens the curvilinear relationship between psychopathy and counterproductive work behavior (CWB), such that counterproductive behaviors accelerate sharply among individuals high in psychopathy when interpersonal conflict is salient. Carter et al. (2024) argue that interpersonal conflict constitutes a psychologically threatening context because it signals disrespect, rejection, and interpersonal antagonism—stimuli to which individuals high in psychopathy are particularly sensitive. Drawing on trait activation logic, the authors suggest that psychopathic employees interpret coworker conflict through a hostile attribution lens, which legitimizes retaliatory and norm-violating behavior. Importantly, relationship conflict does not simply increase CWB uniformly; rather, it amplifies the acceleration of CWB at higher levels of psychopathy, consistent with behavioral threshold theory. Empirical results from Study 2 show that the interaction between psychopathy and relationship conflict significantly predicts CWB ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.001$), indicating that negative interpersonal climates function as “bad barrels” that intensify the behavioral expression of psychopathic traits. Thus, relationship conflict serves as a critical contextual mechanism that transforms latent psychopathic tendencies into overtly destructive workplace behaviors.

3.5.1.10 Abusive supervision

Abusive supervision constitutes a particularly potent social moderator that exacerbates the curvilinear relationship between psychopathy and counterproductive work behavior. In Carter et al. (2024), supervisory abuse is treated as a highly salient interpersonal stressor that activates psychopathic tendencies by signaling status threat, disrespect, and interpersonal hostility. Defined as the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors by supervisors (Tepper, 2000), abusive supervision includes acts such as public ridicule, belittling, unfair blame, and deliberate social exclusion. Unlike peer conflict, abuse originating

from a supervisor carries symbolic weight due to power asymmetry, making it a more severe and personally threatening social cue. Drawing on Trait Activation Theory, researchers argue that individuals high in psychopathy are especially vigilant to signs of mistreatment and disapproval from authority figures. Supervisory abuse therefore functions as a strong trait-relevant cue that legitimizes retaliatory and norm-violating behavior. Importantly, the authors demonstrate that abusive supervision does not simply increase counterproductive work behavior linearly. Instead, it amplifies the acceleration of CWB at higher levels of psychopathy, consistent with behavioral threshold theory. Empirical findings across multiple studies show a significant interaction between psychopathy and abusive supervision (e.g., $\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$ in Study 2), indicating that under abusive leadership, individuals high in psychopathy exhibit disproportionately higher levels of harmful workplace behavior. Carter et al. further suggest that psychopathic employees may perceive abusive supervision as moral justification for aggression, given their reduced concern for social norms and heightened propensity for retaliatory behavior. In such contexts, abusive leadership effectively lowers internal and external constraints on deviance, transforming latent psychopathic tendencies into overt counterproductive acts. Thus, abusive supervision emerges not merely as a harmful leadership style but as a contextual catalyst that unlocks the most destructive behavioral expressions of psychopathy in the workplace.

3.5.1.11 Rules climate

Rules climate refers to an organizational environment where behavior is guided by clearly defined rules, policies, and procedures, and where adherence to these rules is expected and enforced (Victor and Cullen, 1988). It has been identified as an organizational moderator influencing the relationship between leader Machiavellianism and abusive supervision. De Hoogh et al. (2021) found that in contexts with a low rules climate, where norms and regulations are weak or poorly enforced, the positive relationship between Machiavellian traits and abusive supervisory behavior is strengthened. Conversely, a high rules climate, characterized by clear and strictly enforced organizational rules, mitigates this relationship, reducing the likelihood that Machiavellian leaders will engage in abusive supervision. Specifically, their study showed that when the rules climate was high, the association between leader Machiavellianism and abusive supervision became non-significant, indicating that strong rule enforcement can serve as a buffer against the expression of harmful dark traits in leadership (De Hoogh et al., 2021).

3.5.1.12 Instrumental climate

Instrumental climate refers to an organizational environment where self-interest, rule-bending, and achieving ends by any means are normalized (Victor and Cullen, 1988). De Hoogh et al. (2021) demonstrated that a high instrumental climate strengthens the positive relationship between leader Machiavellianism and abusive supervision. In such climates, where unethical behavior is implicitly accepted or even encouraged, Machiavellian leaders feel freer to engage in exploitative and self-serving behaviors. The instrumental climate acts as an activator for these dark traits by signaling that manipulation and disregard for others' needs are permissible. Conversely, in a low instrumental climate, where ethical standards

are upheld and self-serving actions are discouraged, the expression of Machiavellian abusive behaviors weakens, as leaders face higher risks of social sanction or punishment (De Hoogh et al., 2021).

3.5.1.13 LMX ambivalence

LMX ambivalence describes the simultaneous presence of positive and negative perceptions in leader-member relationships, reflecting mixed feelings and uncertainty about the quality of the exchange (Johnson and Bradbury, 2015). Sun et al. (2024) found that LMX ambivalence acts as an important situational moderator that intensifies the activation of Machiavellian tendencies, specifically increasing the likelihood of engaging in facades of conformity. Although traditionally viewed as negative, LMX ambivalence can function as a contextual cue that triggers adaptive behaviors in employees, highlighting its complex role in shaping workplace dynamics and relational outcomes.

3.5.2 Mediating mechanisms that explain how traits are translated into specific outcomes

While moderators determine when and under what conditions Dark Triad traits influence behavior, mediating mechanisms clarify how these traits are translated into specific workplace outcomes. Mediators are the psychological, cognitive, or affective processes through which personality dispositions impact behaviors and performance (Baron and Kenny, 1986). In the context of dark personality traits, mediation models help unpack the internal pathways linking traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy with organizational phenomena. Understanding these mediating mechanisms is crucial for designing targeted interventions aimed at disrupting the translation of dark traits into negative workplace outcomes. This section synthesizes key mediating mechanisms identified in the analyzed literature.

3.5.2.1 Felt responsibility for constructive change

Felt Responsibility for Constructive Change (FRCC) is defined as an individual's internalized sense of obligation to bring about positive change within the organization (Fuller et al., 2015). In the context of narcissistic traits, FRCC has been identified as a mediating mechanism that explains how personality dispositions are translated into proactive behaviors. Lang et al. (2022) demonstrated that narcissistic employees, motivated by a desire for recognition, self-affirmation, and success, may experience a heightened sense of responsibility for initiating constructive change. This internal motivation drives them to engage in change-oriented citizenship behaviors, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. As the authors note, "our research found a new mechanism (i.e., FRCC) that could explain the effects of narcissism on OCB-CH," (Lang et al., 2022) emphasizing the psychological pathway through which narcissism, despite being a dark trait, can lead to desirable organizational outcomes.

3.5.2.2 Self-serving behavior

Recent empirical findings demonstrate that self-serving behavior mediates the relationship between leader narcissism and follower trust, serving as a critical mechanism through which narcissistic traits impact organizational outcomes. Specifically,

the indirect negative effect of leader narcissism on trust via self-serving behavior is contingent upon contextual moderators such as performance and mastery climates. Under high performance climate conditions, where competition and individual superiority are emphasized, narcissistic leaders exhibit increased self-serving behaviors, which in turn reduce followers' trust (Braun et al., 2025). Conversely, in high mastery climates, characterized by collaboration and shared success, these self-serving tendencies are significantly diminished, mitigating their harmful effects on trust (Nerstad et al., 2018).

3.5.2.3 Demand–ability misfit

Demand–Ability Misfit (DA) has been identified as a mediating mechanism that helps explain how Dark Triad traits manifest in counterproductive workplace behaviors. In the study by Yi and Zhang (2025), DA misfit, defined as the mismatch between job demands and an individual's advanced skills or qualifications, was positively predicted by narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and achievement goal orientation. This misalignment was associated with deviant behaviors in the workplace, as individuals with underutilized expertise may experience negative affective states such as boredom or frustration. These emotional responses appear to mediate the link between maladaptive personality traits and harmful behaviors, offering insight into how a person–job misfit can activate the darker aspects of personality in organizational settings.

3.5.2.4 Supply–need misfit

Supply–Need Misfit (SN) occurs when organizational resources and rewards fail to meet the psychological needs of external hires, such as recognition and autonomy (Cable and DeRue, 2002). According to Yi and Zhang (2025), this misalignment triggers unmet expectations and increases strain by reducing person-organization fit. The study found that Dark Triad traits positively predict SN, which in turn significantly mediates the relationship between these traits and deviant workplace behaviors. Thus, SN functions as a key psychological mechanism through which maladaptive personality traits are translated into harmful organizational outcomes, highlighting the critical role of resource adequacy and need fulfillment in buffering negative trait expression.

3.5.2.5 Behavioral threshold

Behavioral Threshold Theory (BTT) provides a theoretical explanation for the curvilinear relationship between psychopathy and counterproductive work behavior. BTT posits that the expression of personality traits depends on crossing an individual-specific threshold (Tett and Guterman, 2000). Individuals with low to moderate levels of a trait may show minimal behavioral impact because situational demands are insufficient to activate the trait. However, once trait intensity or situational triggers surpass the threshold, the likelihood and frequency of trait-consistent behaviors sharply increase (Carter et al., 2024). Studies suggest that clear rules, transparency, and sanctions constrain psychopathic tendencies, whereas environments marked by autonomy, low oversight, or ambiguous norms may afford the expression of dark traits such as psychopathy or Machiavellianism (LeBreton

et al., 2018). This perspective clarifies why psychopathy does not relate to counterproductive work behavior in a simple linear way, highlighting the complexity of how dark traits manifest in workplace outcomes.

3.5.2.6 Abusive supervision

Abusive supervision functions as a mediating mechanism through which leader Machiavellianism translates into negative follower outcomes. De Hoogh et al. (2021) found that Machiavellian leaders are more likely to engage in abusive supervisory behaviors, particularly in organizational contexts characterized by low rules climate and high instrumental climate. This abusive behavior then mediates the relationship between Machiavellian traits and follower responses such as decreased organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and increased emotional exhaustion. Thus, abusive supervision serves as the behavioral expression of dark traits that directly impacts employee wellbeing and organizational functioning.

3.5.2.7 Facades of conformity

Facades of conformity refer to the deliberate presentation of false agreement or compliance with organizational norms and expectations, often used as a strategic behavior to navigate complex social dynamics at work (Hewlin, 2003). Research by Sun et al. (2024) demonstrates that Machiavellian individuals engage in facades of conformity to manage their relationships with leaders and conserve psychological resources. These behaviors serve as a mediating mechanism through which Machiavellianism translates into increased relational energy, a positive relational outcome that reflects enhanced motivation and connection in workplace interactions. Thus, facades of conformity enable individuals to adapt their external behavior strategically, fostering relational benefits despite underlying personality dispositions.

3.5.3 Observed organizational consequences of activated Dark Triad traits

3.5.3.1 Exploitative leadership

Exploitative leadership, characterized by self-serving and manipulative behaviors toward subordinates, has been empirically linked to activated Dark Triad traits, particularly psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Schmid et al., 2018). Structural equation modeling analyses showed that perceived deceptive situations moderate these relationships. Psychopathy predicts exploitative leadership significantly under both low and high deception perceptions, with stronger effects when deception is perceived as high. Machiavellianism predicts exploitative leadership only under low deception, with no significant effect under high deception. Additionally, political skill moderates these relationships, with psychopathy's link to exploitative leadership significant regardless of political skill level but varying in strength, and Machiavellianism's link significant only at high political skill levels. Narcissism showed no significant association with exploitative leadership across contexts (Lazreg and Lakhali, 2022).

3.5.3.2 Turnover intentions

One of the observed organizational consequences of activated Dark Triad traits is an increase in exit behaviors, such as thinking

about quitting, changing jobs, or actually leaving the organization (Zagenczyk et al., 2017).

3.5.3.3 Neglect

Another observed organizational consequence of activated Dark Triad traits in leadership is increased neglect behavior among employees. According to Zagenczyk et al. (2017), neglect involves reduced work effort, diminished attention to quality, and heightened withdrawal behaviors such as tardiness and absenteeism.

3.5.3.4 Change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior

One of the observed outcomes of narcissistic trait activation in organizational contexts is change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (OCB-CH). Defined as voluntary and constructive efforts by employees to bring about change in work methods, policies, or practices (Choi, 2007), OCB-CH represents a proactive and non-conforming form of extra-role behavior. Despite narcissism being a Dark Triad trait, Lang et al. (2022) found that narcissistic individuals can demonstrate higher levels of OCB-CH, particularly under conditions of environmental uncertainty. This is explained by narcissists' desire for recognition, their confidence in dealing with risk, and their motivation to affirm their self-worth through visible contributions. As the authors note, "narcissism may not only benefit individuals themselves [...] but may also benefit organizations by promoting citizenship behaviors" (Lang et al., 2022). Thus, narcissism, when activated in specific contexts, may lead to observable positive organizational outcomes such as innovative change and initiative.

3.5.3.5 Self-serving behavior

Self-serving behavior is a prominent organizational consequence of activated Dark Triad traits, particularly narcissism in leaders. Research shows that such behavior involves leaders prioritizing their own interests over those of followers and the organization, often manifested through manipulation, exploitation, and disregard for others' needs. Braun et al. (2025) note that narcissistic leaders "feel justified in displaying dominance and pursuing their own interests" which results in "self-serving behavior expressed in egocentric actions." This egocentric conduct significantly undermines followers' trust in the leader, leading to deteriorated leader-follower relationships (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau, 1998). Moreover, Burke et al. (2007) highlight that such behavior is associated with "reduced employee engagement, lower job satisfaction, and impaired organizational functioning." These findings position self-serving behavior as a critical mechanism through which activated Dark Triad traits translate into harmful organizational outcomes.

3.5.3.6 Trust in the leader

Trust in a leader refers to the follower's willingness to be vulnerable based on the belief in the leader's positive intentions (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau, 1998). It plays a key role in promoting engagement, task performance, and OCB, while reducing negative reactions toward the leader (Burke et al., 2007; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Research shows that when narcissistic leaders display self-serving behavior, followers' trust tends to diminish (Braun et al., 2025).

3.5.3.7 Deviant behavior

Deviant Behavior (DB) among employees, as described by [Yi and Zhang \(2025\)](#), often takes the form of actions that, while counterproductive and harmful, remain within the formal boundaries of organizational protocols and hierarchical structures. Because these behaviors do not overtly violate established rules, their immediate impact on the organization tends to be limited or subtle. However, this subtlety does not diminish their negative significance; DB still reflects the detrimental consequences of activated Dark Triad traits, as it gradually erodes workplace climate and undermines organizational effectiveness over time. This pattern illustrates how maladaptive personality traits can manifest in covert deviance that weakens the organization incrementally rather than through obvious rule-breaking.

3.5.3.8 Counterproductive work behavior

Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) refers to intentional employee actions that harm organizations or their members, including sabotage, dishonesty, aggression, absenteeism, and harassment ([Spector and Fox, 2005](#)). These behaviors negatively affect organizational performance, reduce team morale, and increase turnover ([Bennett and Robinson, 2000](#)). Within the context of Dark Triad traits, especially psychopathy, CWB represents a critical negative outcome of trait activation. Individuals with higher levels of psychopathy are more prone to engage in CWB, particularly in adverse social environments. As [Carter et al. \(2024\)](#) note, “the frequency of counterproductive work behavior enactment increasingly accelerates among individuals whose psychopathy levels exceed an inflection point,” highlighting how maladaptive traits translate into harmful workplace conduct that undermines organizational functioning.

3.5.3.9 Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, understood as a state of feeling emotionally drained and depleted of emotional resources, is frequently reported as a negative consequence of the activation of Dark Triad traits in leadership ([Maslach et al., 2001](#)). De Hoogh et al. found that leader Machiavellianism and abusive supervision were positively related to follower emotional exhaustion, indicating increased psychological strain among employees. Additionally, the study identified gender differences, with women reporting significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion than men ($r = 0.15$, $p = 0.044$), suggesting that female employees may be more vulnerable to the harmful effects of toxic leadership behaviors. These findings underscore the importance of considering emotional exhaustion as a key organizational outcome when examining the impact of dark personality traits in leaders.

3.5.3.10 Organizational citizenship behaviors

Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB) refers to discretionary, prosocial actions by employees that go beyond formal job requirements and support organizational effectiveness. The research by [De Hoogh et al. \(2021\)](#) demonstrates that leader Machiavellianism and abusive supervision negatively impact follower OCB, meaning that employees under such leadership tend to reduce their voluntary cooperation and helpful behaviors. This reduction is explained by resource depletion caused by abusive supervision and can also be a subtle form of retaliation by

employees. The study’s findings highlight that toxic leadership not only harms employee wellbeing but also undermines important prosocial behaviors critical for organizational functioning.

3.5.3.11 Information gathering gossip

Information gathering gossip is a form of organizational gossip characterized by the exchange of work-related information that helps individuals stay informed about their environment ([Martinescu et al., 2019](#)). Research indicates that abusive supervision can indirectly increase information gathering gossip through the activation of Dark Triad traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy ([Uçan and Avci, 2023](#)). These traits mediate the relationship, suggesting that employees experiencing abusive supervision may engage in information gathering gossip as a coping or strategic behavior to navigate a hostile work environment. This type of gossip, while often viewed as neutral or even functional, can have complex implications for organizational dynamics.

3.5.3.12 Relationship building gossip

Relationship building gossip involves informal communication aimed at strengthening social bonds and fostering workplace relationships ([Foster, 2004](#)). Studies show that abusive supervision positively influences relationship building gossip through the mediating effects of Dark Triad traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (e.g., “the higher the level of abusive supervision, the higher the level of the dark triad, leading to better relationship building gossip”) ([Uçan and Avci, 2023](#)). This suggests that employees under abusive leaders may use gossip as a social strategy to create alliances and support networks. While relationship building gossip can enhance social cohesion, it may also perpetuate negative group dynamics depending on context.

3.5.3.13 Negative influence gossip

Negative influence gossip refers to informal communication that spreads harmful or damaging information intended to undermine others in the workplace ([Wert and Salovey, 2004](#)). The study conducted by [Uçan and Avci \(2023\)](#) found that abusive supervision did not have a direct significant effect on negative influence gossip; however, Dark Triad traits mediated this relationship in complex ways. Specifically, Machiavellianism and psychopathy were found to significantly and negatively mediate the relationship, indicating that higher levels of these traits linked to abusive supervision increase negative influence gossip (e.g., “the higher the level of abusive supervision, the higher the level of Machiavellianism, leading to more negative influence gossip”). Interestingly, narcissism showed a mixed mediation effect, being significant in one sample but not in another. This highlights the nuanced role of dark personality traits in driving negative gossip behaviors that can harm organizational climate.

The organizational consequences of negative influence gossip are substantial. Such gossip can undermine trust among employees and reduce team cohesion by damaging interpersonal relationships and impairing communication within organizations ([Uçan and Avci, 2023](#)). It can also negatively affect employees’ organizational identity and self-esteem, leading to lower morale and decreased job satisfaction. Moreover, negative influence gossip is associated with higher turnover intentions and reduced work engagement, as

employees experience psychological distress, social exclusion, and diminished motivation in the workplace (Zhou et al., 2019; Uçan and Avci, 2023).

3.5.3.14 Relational energy

Relational energy refers to the psychological and emotional vitality that employees gain from interactions with their leaders or colleagues. Research by Sun et al. (2024) demonstrates that individuals high in Machiavellianism can enhance their relational energy through “facades of conformity”—strategically pretending to align with leaders’ expectations. This process is especially activated in contexts of leader-member exchange (LMX) ambivalence. As a result, relational energy supports engagement and work effectiveness, enabling manipulative individuals to function more successfully within organizations.

3.6 Fifth stage: synthesis and reporting of results—framework analysis

To complement the thematic analysis and enhance the transparency of cross-study comparisons, a framework matrix was constructed (Appendix Table B2). This structured, matrix-based approach allowed for systematic mapping of moderators, mediators, activated behaviors, and organizational outcomes, facilitating a clear synthesis aligned with the research questions and Trait Activation Theory.

The data were organized into the following analytical dimensions: (1) Type of moderation or effect, (2) Specific moderator or mediator, (3) Activated behavior, (4) Organizational outcome, (5) Empirical status of the finding, and (6) Dimensions of the Dark Triad involved. This tabular structure served as a foundation for synthesizing patterns within and across studies, offering a comprehensive view of the mechanisms and consequences associated with the behavioral expression of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy in organizational settings. The column labeled “Type of moderation or effect” distinguished between variables that serve as moderators or mediators influencing the activation and behavioral expression of Dark Triad traits. Positive (buffering) moderators identified in the literature included variables such as political skill, mastery climate, perceived psychological safety (PPS), high rules climate, and facades of conformity, which tend to mitigate or reduce the negative impact of dark traits. For example, perceived psychological safety also functioned as a moderator between achievement goal orientation and supply-need misfit, illustrating its complex buffering role. Conversely, negative (threat-activating) moderators and mediators comprised factors such as deceptive situations, psychological contract violation, performance climate, supply-need misfit, demand-ability misfit, low psychological safety, achievement goal orientation, relationship conflict, abusive supervision, low rules climate, and low instrumental climate. These contextual conditions tend to activate or amplify the expression of maladaptive behaviors linked to Dark Triad traits. For instance, deceptive situations and contract violations serve as triggers, while climates emphasizing performance pressure or low safety contribute to increased trait activation and its harmful workplace consequences.

Next, the column “Moderator or mediator” details the precise contextual or individual factors identified in the reviewed studies that influence the relationship between Dark Triad traits and workplace behaviors.

In the “Activated behavior” column, specific workplace behaviors were assigned as outcomes resulting from the activation of Dark Triad traits under the influence of the identified moderators or mediators. These behaviors reflect how particular contextual or personal factors trigger the expression of dark personality traits, shaping distinct patterns of conduct within organizational settings.

The “Organizational outcome” dimension captured the broader consequences of these behaviors, with recurrent themes such as decreased team trust, higher turnover intentions, reduced employee wellbeing, and climate erosion. Some studies also reported more nuanced or ambivalent outcomes.

The “Status of findings” column indicated whether the reported relationships or effects were confirmed in the empirical studies in articles included in the systematic literature review. This assessment provided a clear and critical overview of the strength and consistency of the evidence supporting each correlation, helping to distinguish well-substantiated findings from those that remain tentative or require further empirical validation.

Finally, the “Dimensions of the Dark Triad” column identified which specific trait(s) Machiavellianism, narcissism, or psychopathy—were examined in each reported correlation. While some studies investigated all three traits simultaneously, others focused on only one. This distinction enabled a clearer understanding of trait-specific effects and ensured that each Dark Triad dimension was represented across the reviewed literature. Highlighting these differences is important, as certain traits may relate differently to workplace outcomes depending on the context and behavioral expression.

By integrating these dimensions, the matrix not only supported a multidimensional synthesis of findings but also illuminated patterns that might have been obscured in traditional narrative reviews. A detailed presentation of the coded data, including representative studies and thematic categorization, is provided in Appendix Table B1.

4 Discussion

This systematic literature review analyzed studies with a combined sample of 6,784 participants. The studies included and analyzed in this systematic literature review are characterized by high methodological quality, as evidenced by their alignment with established evaluation criteria, so it can be a strong empirical basis for understanding the activation of Dark Triad traits in leadership contexts.

Among the included studies, three examined the Dark Triad as a whole, three focused exclusively on narcissism, two investigated Machiavellianism, and one study concentrated solely on psychopathy. This distribution ensures that each dimension of the Dark Triad is represented, allowing for comprehensive and trait-specific insights into their activation and impact within organizational settings. Particularly valuable, from the author’s research perspective, is the fact that several of the analyzed studies

examined the leader-follower relationship, providing important insights into how Dark Triad traits influence interpersonal dynamics within organizational contexts.

Moreover, the reviewed research encompasses both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, which enhances the robustness and reliability of the findings. The inclusion of longitudinal studies is valuable, as it allows for a better understanding of causal relationships and the dynamic nature of Dark Triad trait activation and its effects over time.

Regarding **RQ1: What contextual and personal factors contribute to the emergence and behavioral expression of Dark Triad traits in workplace settings?** The reviewed studies underscore the critical role of both organizational and individual moderators. The distribution of studies is presented in [Appendix Table B2](#). Among the contextual factors, key elements include an uncertain environment e.g., deceptive situations, mastery climate, rules climate, instrumental climate, performance climate, relationship conflict, and abusive supervision. At the individual level, important moderators comprise political skill, perceived psychological safety, facades of conformity, psychological contract violation, supply-need misfit, demand-ability misfit, low psychological safety, achievement goal orientation, and LMX ambivalence.

This pattern of findings closely reflects the logic of Trait Activation Theory ([Tett and Burnett, 2003](#)), which proposes that personality traits are expressed only when the surrounding context provides cues that make such behaviors possible or rewarding. In practical terms, certain environmental features, such as a strong performance climate or the presence of abusive supervision, act as activating conditions that invite the expression of dark tendencies. In contrast, settings characterized by clear ethical norms, a cooperative climate, or high psychological safety tend to suppress or redirect these impulses. This balance between activation and inhibition mirrors what [Judge and Zapata \(2015\)](#) describe as the reciprocal influence between individual dispositions and situational affordances in shaping workplace behavior.

These observations also resonate with earlier empirical work showing that competitive, high-pressure climates intensify self-interested and manipulative behaviors ([Boddy, 2011](#); [Grijalva and Zhang, 2016](#)), whereas mastery-oriented or ethical environments can buffer their negative expression ([Schmid et al., 2019](#)). For example, the mitigating role of mastery climate noted by [Braun et al. \(2025\)](#) parallels the results of [Nerstad et al. \(2018\)](#), who found that cooperative climates reduce the salience of self-promotion and ego-driven motives among leaders. Likewise, the moderating influence of political skill observed by [Lazreg and Lakhel \(2022\)](#) supports [Ferris et al. \(2007\)](#), who argued that socially astute individuals can channel even darker motives into strategic but outwardly adaptive forms of influence.

It is important to note that some factors are difficult to categorize unambiguously. For example, a deceptive situation can be viewed both as an organizational contextual factor shaping the environment and as a subjective perception by the individual. Therefore, classification depends on perspective and is not clear-cut, which presents certain limitations in categorizing these moderators. This distinction reinforces [Mischel's \(1977\)](#) interactionist view that personality expression emerges from the

dynamic interplay between situational cues and personal meaning-making. From this standpoint, the boundary between contextual and individual moderators becomes blurred, since employees' perceptions of fairness, trust, or threat can either activate or suppress darker behavioral tendencies.

Addressing **RQ2: What are the effects of Dark Triad traits on workplace outcomes?** The evidence points to a set of consequences that depend heavily on contextual and interpersonal conditions. Across the reviewed studies, the activation of Dark Triad traits most commonly translated into dysfunctional outcomes such as exploitative leadership, self-serving or counterproductive behavior, emotional exhaustion, and higher turnover intentions. These findings are consistent with earlier research linking dark personality traits to destructive leadership styles and diminished employee wellbeing ([O'Boyle et al., 2012](#); [Boddy, 2011](#)). They also reaffirm that, in organizational contexts lacking ethical oversight or clear behavioral norms, individuals high in Machiavellianism, narcissism, or psychopathy are more likely to engage in manipulation, dominance, and moral disengagement ([Babiak and Hare, 2006](#); [Schmid et al., 2019](#)).

However, the reviewed evidence also illustrates that the behavioral expression of dark traits is not uniformly harmful. In certain contexts, these same dispositions can be redirected toward outcomes that serve both individual and organizational goals. For example, [Lang et al. \(2022\)](#) demonstrated that narcissism may foster change-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors when individuals perceive opportunities for visibility and recognition, particularly under conditions of environmental uncertainty. This aligns with earlier arguments by [Judge et al. \(2009\)](#) and [Harms \(2011\)](#) suggesting that traits typically viewed as maladaptive can yield adaptive performance when activated in environments that reward assertiveness, innovation, or confidence.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce the person-situation interactionist framework ([Mischel, 1977](#); [Judge and Zapata, 2015](#)), emphasizing that personality effects cannot be understood in isolation from their situational context. They also extend Trait Activation Theory by illustrating that contextual cues not only trigger behavioral expression but can also determine its directional valence. That is, whether the resulting behavior manifests as constructive (e.g., proactive change, strategic influence) or destructive (e.g., exploitation, aggression). In this sense, situational factors act as a behavioral filter that channels the motivational core of dark traits toward either socially adaptive or maladaptive ends.

Furthermore, several studies reviewed in this analysis point to interpersonal processes, such as relationship conflict, abusive supervision, or psychological safety, as critical mechanisms linking dark traits to outcomes. These findings align with [Mitchell and Ambrose \(2007\)](#), who observed that negative supervisory climates exacerbate retaliatory or counterproductive behaviors among employees. Conversely, high psychological safety appears to weaken these relationships by promoting open communication and reducing defensive or manipulative behaviors ([Yi and Zhang, 2025](#)). This underscores the importance of social context as a determinant of whether dark personality traits translate into relational toxicity or constructive engagement.

Overall, the reviewed evidence supports a contextually contingent model of dark trait outcomes. The same dispositional tendencies that produce exploitative or unethical behaviors in competitive, high-pressure settings can also underpin increased relational energy, reflecting enhanced motivation and connection in workplace interactions or change-oriented citizenship behaviors in environments that provide structure, feedback, and ethical constraints (Lang et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2024; Campbell et al., 2023). This duality highlights the theoretical importance of Trait Activation Theory in moving beyond a purely pathological view of dark traits toward a more integrative understanding of how these characteristics interact with organizational systems.

5 Limitations

It is important to acknowledge limitations, such as potential publication bias, heterogeneity in measurement of Dark Triad traits, and the predominance of self-report data, which may affect the robustness of conclusions. The decision to restrict the review to open-access may result in an incomplete representation of the available evidence, which should be considered when interpreting the findings. Moreover, some variables, such as abusive supervision, appear across multiple studies but assume different roles depending on the research context. For example, a given factor may function as a mediator in one study, a moderator in another, or even as an outcome variable. This variability highlights the conceptual complexity involved in operationalizing these constructs within the Dark Triad literature and underscores the need for careful consideration of contextual nuances when interpreting results.

Another limitation is that the studies included did not measure narcissism or psychopathy according to their distinct facets, such as vulnerable and grandiose narcissism or the boldness, meanness, and disinhibition components of psychopathy. This lack of facet-level measurement constrains the granularity of conclusions, as different facets may differentially relate to workplace outcomes or be activated under varying organizational contexts. Consequently, the review may overlook nuanced patterns in how these traits manifest and interact with situational factors.

Notably, seven out of the nine included studies relied on self-report measures. While self-report instruments are widely used and offer efficient access to individuals' internal states and trait-level characteristics, their predominance has important methodological implications. In the context of Dark Triad research, self-reports may be particularly susceptible to social desirability bias, impression management, and limited self-awareness, especially given the manipulative and socially aversive nature of these traits. This reliance may therefore lead to underreporting or distortion of trait expressions, potentially affecting the validity and comparability of findings.

Moreover, the literature on dark personality traits and workplace outcomes reveals terminological inconsistencies, especially regarding negative employee behaviors. Terms like "deviant behavior" and "counterproductive work behavior (CWB)" are often used interchangeably but sometimes are deliberately differentiated to emphasize distinct aspects of harmful conduct. Deviant Behavior broadly encompasses any violation of organizational norms, including both subtle and overt rule-breaking, whereas CWB typically refers to deliberate

actions causing direct harm to organizational functioning, such as sabotage, theft, or absenteeism.

This terminological variation reflects researchers' attempts to capture nuanced differences in the nature and impact of maladaptive behaviors. However, inconsistent definitions and measurement approaches create challenges for synthesizing findings across studies. To advance the field, greater conceptual clarity and standardized terminology are needed to improve comparability of results and deepen our understanding of how Dark Triad traits manifest in specific maladaptive workplace behaviors.

A further limitation concerns the varying depth with which organizational implications are addressed in the reviewed studies. While many articles report statistically significant relationships—for instance, between psychopathy and increased counterproductive work behavior—some fail to elaborate on the specific manifestations of these behaviors within the organizational context. In such cases, authors often refer back to general definitions of CWB without providing detailed examples or contextualized descriptions derived from their empirical data. This lack of specificity limits the practical applicability of the findings and restricts our understanding of how dark traits translate into concrete behaviors in real workplace settings.

Another limitation is the small number of studies included in this review (9). Although the combined sample of participants across studies is substantial (6,784), the limited number of studies constrains the generalizability of the findings. Caution is therefore warranted when applying these results to broader organizational populations or different cultural contexts.

The next limitation of this systematic literature review is that it focused exclusively on the Dark Triad traits, without including studies explicitly examining the Dark Tetrad, which incorporates sadism alongside these three traits (Furnham and Cuppello, 2024). Consequently, some research on the Dark Tetrad that provides additional insights into Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy may have been omitted. Given the growing evidence on the relevance of sadism and the interrelated nature of these traits in workplace behavior and leadership, future reviews could benefit from incorporating Dark Tetrad studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of dark personality traits in organizational contexts (Fernández-Del-Río et al., 2022).

Studying dark personality traits in organizational contexts also presents methodological and ethical challenges. These include concerns related to participant stigma, the social desirability of responses, and the difficulty of designing and implementing effective interventions without reinforcing negative labeling. Such complexities may limit access to authentic data or constrain the interpretation of findings. Future research should be mindful of these issues and develop ethically sound approaches that balance scientific rigor with sensitivity to participants' experiences and reputational risks.

6 Practical implications

The findings of this review can offer several important practical implications for organizational policy, leadership development, and workplace interventions.

First, the evidence underscores the necessity of incorporating personality-based assessments, including measures of Dark Triad traits, into leadership selection and development processes. While the presence of such traits does not automatically translate into dysfunctional behavior, their expression is contingent upon specific contextual cues. Identifying individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism, narcissism, or psychopathy—particularly in high-risk environments—may enable early intervention and reduce the likelihood of destructive leadership patterns emerging.

Second, the results highlight the critical role of organizational context in moderating the behavioral expression of dark personality traits. Contextual factors such as performance climates, instrumental rule structures, ambiguous expectations, and low psychological safety can act as activating conditions. Organizations should therefore prioritize the development of psychologically safe, mastery-oriented climates with clear behavioral norms, as these may buffer the activation of maladaptive traits and promote prosocial conduct.

Third, attention should be given to employees navigating ambiguous or ambivalent leader–member relationships, as these conditions may elicit surface-level conformity behaviors (e.g., facades of conformity) and psychological strain. Providing relational resources—such as mentoring, coaching, or structured feedback mechanisms—may help mitigate the negative impact of relational uncertainty and foster more authentic organizational engagement.

Fourth, the review indicates that under certain conditions, individuals high in Dark Triad traits may engage in constructive behaviors, such as change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior or strategic influence. Rather than adopting a solely deficit-based view, practitioners should consider the potential to harness specific dark tendencies within ethical boundaries by fostering climates that emphasize goal clarity, accountability, and interpersonal trust.

Finally, the variability in how workplace misbehaviors are defined—such as the overlap between deviant behavior and counterproductive work behavior—suggests the need for greater definitional consistency in organizational policies and training. Clear and operational definitions of undesirable behaviors, informed by empirical research, may enhance the organization's ability to monitor, prevent, and respond to harmful actions more effectively.

Collectively, these implications call for a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to managing dark personality traits in organizational settings—one that aligns with the principles of Trait Activation Theory and acknowledges the dynamic interplay between individual dispositions and environmental cues.

7 Future research suggestion

There is considerable opportunity for future studies to expand the conceptual understanding of how Dark Triad traits interact with situational cues. In particular, further inquiry into the mechanisms that either facilitate or buffer the activation of dark traits. While the current evidence points to various moderators—both individual and contextual—future research could deepen this perspective by exploring protective organizational factors, such as

ethical leadership, high-quality interpersonal relationships, or a strong climate of psychological safety. Additionally, investigating how group-level or systemic features (e.g., team norms, industry-specific stressors) influence the salience of dark traits could yield novel insights.

Future research would also benefit from a more granular examination of behavioral outcomes associated with activated Dark Triad traits. In particular, when constructs like counterproductive work behavior or deviance are used as outcome variables, studies should move beyond aggregate scoring or general definitions to explore which specific behaviors are most prevalent in a given organizational context. Such an approach would not only enhance the explanatory power of findings but also provide more actionable insights for practitioners seeking to mitigate these behaviors through targeted interventions. Qualitative or mixed-methods studies could be especially valuable in uncovering the nuanced expressions of maladaptive behavior that are currently masked by broad categorical labels.

Another promising direction involves refining the conceptual clarity and consistency of outcome variables. The overlapping but distinct constructs of deviant behavior, counterproductive work behavior, and exploitative leadership are often used interchangeably, which poses challenges for synthesis and theory-building. More precise definitions and harmonized measurement approaches would enhance the comparability and cumulative nature of research findings.

Altogether, future research should aim to develop a more integrated, dynamic, and culturally inclusive framework for understanding the activation of Dark Triad traits in organizational life.

8 Conclusion

This review looked at how Dark Triad traits show up in organizational settings. Looking across various studies, it's clear that these traits don't act in isolation. How they appear depends a lot on both personal tendencies and the context of the workplace. This fits with Trait Activation Theory, which suggests that personality traits aren't fixed—they emerge in response to situations.

Certain types of organizational climates, like highly competitive, mastery-driven, or ethically unclear environments, seem to make dark traits more noticeable. Relationships also play a role. People may act manipulatively or in self-serving ways when faced with abusive supervisors or mixed leader–member dynamics, while workplaces built on trust and collaboration tend to keep these behaviors in check. Personal factors, like political skill or feeling psychologically safe, also affect how these traits show themselves, sometimes dampening them, sometimes intensifying them.

The research paints a mixed picture. Dark traits can lead to harmful outcomes, such as exploitative leadership or workplace deviance, but they can also show up in ways that aren't entirely negative, like taking initiative or driving change. Recognizing this variation helps move past the idea that these traits are always bad.

At the same time, the literature still has some conceptual confusion. The lines between different constructs aren't always clear, and the effects on organizations aren't consistently studied.

Fixing this will require sharper definitions and a stronger link between theory and real-world observations.

Overall, these findings suggest we need a more context-aware approach to personality at work. Knowing when and why dark traits emerge, and through what mechanisms, can guide leadership development, the design of ethical climates, and preventive practices. The way personality interacts with the environment is complex, but it's essential to understanding how organizations really function today.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

SC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Supplementary material

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