

# Angel on one shoulder: Can perceived organizational support moderate the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and counterproductive work behavior?



Joshua C. Palmer<sup>a,\*</sup>, Meera Komaraju<sup>b</sup>, Min Z. Carter<sup>c</sup>, Steven J. Karau<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Management, Florida State University, 821 Academic Way, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1110, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 1125 Lincoln Drive, Carbondale, IL 62901-6502, USA

<sup>c</sup> Department of Management, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 1025 Lincoln Drive, Carbondale, IL 62901-4629, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on social exchange theory and a person-situation framework, we examined perceived organizational support as a moderator of the relationship between the Dark Triad personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy with specific types of counterproductive work behavior (i.e., sabotage, production deviance, withdrawal, theft, and abuse). Using a sample of 208 currently-employed online participants and structural equation modeling analyses we found that individuals scoring high on the Dark Triad traits reported engaging in some types of counterproductive work behavior less frequently when they perceived higher levels of organizational support. Our results support the person-situation interactionist model and suggest that individuals possessing higher levels of narcissism and psychopathy engage in certain types of counterproductive work behavior relatively less frequently when they perceive the organization as being supportive.

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## 1. Introduction

Dark Triad research has attracted scholars to examine the effect of “dark side” personality traits in the organizational sciences, but this research is still in its youth (O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). The Dark Triad consists of subclinical levels of three intercorrelated yet conceptually separate personality constructs including narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissism includes characteristics such as entitlement and perceived superiority (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Psychopathy includes a lack of empathy and impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Machiavellianism includes the use of manipulative and deceitful behaviors intended to undermine others (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012).

Prior research has shown that individuals scoring high on narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy tend to employ aggressive influence tactics (Jonason et al., 2012) and score low on agreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). They also tend to engage in more counterproductive work behavior (CWB; O’Boyle et al., 2012). CWB includes deliberate actions targeting the organization or people such as sabotage, production deviance, withdrawal, theft, and abuse (Spector et al., 2006).

Individuals scoring high on narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy may see deviant acts as an outlet for releasing their aggression or obtaining revenge. They may also see counterproductive work behaviors as a way to assert their dominance in a social context and obtain resources.

### 1.1. Perceived organizational support as a moderator

Although narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are positively related to CWB, there has been a call for examining the role of contextual factors in strengthening or weakening this relationship (O’Boyle et al., 2012). Because employees operate within an organizational context, it is imperative to examine the effects of an individual’s perception of organizational factors on the relationship between Dark Triad traits and CWB. For example, it is more adaptive for individuals to display their Dark Triad traits in certain organizational contexts (e.g. short-term jobs involving risk) relative to others (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2014). Similarly, individuals scoring high on the Dark Triad report greater satisfaction in jobs providing autonomy and prestige but not too much competition (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2015). Thus, in the current study, we sought to build on prior findings by examining the role of perceived organizational support (POS) on the Dark Triad-workplace outcome relationship.

POS refers to an employees’ perception that their organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). A high level of POS is associated

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Management, College of Business, Florida State University, 821 Academic Way, PO Box 3061110, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1110, USA.  
E-mail address: [jcp12@my.fsu.edu](mailto:jcp12@my.fsu.edu) (J.C. Palmer).

with reduced employee absenteeism (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Eisenberger et al., 1986) and withdrawal behaviors (Eder & Eisenberger, 2008). Because POS could enhance positive organizational outcomes and reduce some types of CWB, we selected POS as the focal contextual variable in examining whether it could reduce the impact of Dark Triad traits on specific types CWB. Specifically, we drew upon social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and person-situation interactionism (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) to theorize how POS may inhibit the frequency with which narcissistic, Machiavellian, and psychopathic employees engage in various types of CWB. In addition, advancing the literature on this topic may also benefit managers and companies by reducing the negative outcomes associated with employee narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy.

We based our hypotheses about the moderating effects of POS on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and person-situation interactionism (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). According to social exchange theory, employees select behaviors by weighing the costs and benefits they expect to receive (Blau, 1964). Perhaps individuals high in narcissism (i.e., self-aggrandizing), Machiavellianism (i.e., manipulative), and psychopathy (i.e., lacking empathy) engage in CWB because they share a common “core of darkness” including callous affect and manipulation (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Prior work has shown that narcissists respond more aggressively to ego-threat, whereas psychopaths respond more aggressively when provoked or unprovoked (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). We propose that high POS may enhance the narcissist's sense of self-importance and reduce ego-threat. We also propose that POS will likely reduce the element of provocation that prime psychopathic employees and having more favorable perceptions of the organization will likely reduce unprovoked CWB. Likewise, we reason that Machiavellians with high POS will view their organizations as less threatening and opt to manipulate behind the scenes instead of using risky overt tactics (i.e., CWB). Thus, perceiving the organization in a more positive way may inhibit the natural tendencies of an employee who is characterized by the Dark Triad traits and result in reduced CWB relative to other trait-equivalent employees with lower POS. Alternatively, individuals with Dark Triad traits who have high POS scores may perceive a strategic advantage in maintaining good standing by engaging in fewer CWBs, thereby allowing them to strengthen their vantage point and consolidate future opportunities to exploit the organization.

The person-situation interactionist model (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) also provides support for the dynamic interaction between Dark Triad traits, POS, and CWB. Specifically, the conditions within which behavior will be attenuated or inhibited, and the strength of such situational constraints, can affect the propensity for trait expression (i.e., trait activation theory; Tett & Burnett, 2003). Hence, contextual variables such as POS may create a buffer that reduces the frequency with which employees high in narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy may engage in CWB.

Consistent with this interactionist logic, negative perceptions of POS are more strongly related to deviance for individuals' low in agreeableness. Thus, negative perceptions of organizational support enhance deviant behaviors among disagreeable individuals, whereas agreeable individuals are likely to avoid deviant behaviors regardless of POS (Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004). Similarly, POS weakens the strength of the positive relationship between aggregated work group withdrawal behaviors and individual withdrawal behaviors (Eder & Eisenberger, 2008). Based on these findings, and drawing upon social exchange theory and the person-situation interactionist model, we predicted that POS would moderate the Dark Triad-CWB relationships such that the usual tendency for individuals with higher levels of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy to engage in greater CWB would be reduced when those individuals perceived higher levels of organizational support.

**Hypothesis 1.** POS will moderate the relationship between narcissism and CWB, such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is low and weaker when POS is high.

**Hypothesis 2.** POS will moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and CWB, such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is low and weaker when POS is high.

**Hypothesis 3.** POS will moderate the relationship between psychopathy and CWB, such that the relationship will be stronger when POS is low and weaker when POS is high.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Cross-sectional data were collected from 208 employees in return for compensation (i.e., 65 cents per participant in U.S. dollars) via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants had a median age range of 30–34 years, with responses ranging from 20 to 24 (i.e., 10.6%) and 60–65 (i.e., 2.4%), and 50.5% were female. About 73.1% of the sample reported working at least 40 h per week ranging from 20 to 24 h per week (i.e., 2.9%) to 50+ h per week (i.e., 4.3%). Job tenure ranged from 1 year to 25 years with a median of 4.5 years. Participants reported a median annual salary of \$21,000–\$40,000, ranging from \$0–\$20,000 (i.e., 16.8%) to \$101,000+ (i.e., 4.8%) in U.S. dollars. The most frequently reported fields of employment were retail (i.e., 15.4%), finance and insurance (i.e., 12.0%), and information (i.e., 9.1%).<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Dark Triad

Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy were measured using the 27-item Short Dark Triad scale (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include “I insist on getting the respect I deserve” (i.e., narcissism), “Most people can be manipulated” (i.e., Machiavellianism), and “People who mess with me always regret it” (i.e., psychopathy). The narcissism (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.77$ ), Machiavellianism ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ), and psychopathy ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ) scales each displayed adequate internal consistency in our study.

#### 2.2.2. Counterproductive work behavior

CWB was measured using the 33-item version of the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (Spector et al., 2006). Responses were indicated on a 5-point frequency scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Once or twice*, 3 = *Once or twice per month*, 4 = *Once or twice per week*, 5 = *Every day*). Sample items include “hit or pushed someone at work” (i.e., abuse), “purposely did your work incorrectly” (i.e., production deviance), “purposely damaged a piece of equipment or property” (i.e., sabotage), “stole something belonging to someone at work” (i.e., theft), and “left work earlier than you were allowed to” (i.e., withdrawal). The five subscales included the 3-item sabotage ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ), 4-item withdrawal ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ), 3-item production deviance ( $\alpha = 0.66$ ), 5-item theft ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), and 17-item abuse ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) subscales.

#### 2.2.3. Perceived organizational support

In line with prior work POS was measured using the eight highest loading items from the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger et al., 1986) with a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item is “The organization takes pride in my accomplishments at work” ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

<sup>1</sup> Our test results indicate no significant differences in POS, sabotage, production deviance, withdrawal, theft, or abuse among our respondents in various demographic groups, with two exceptions that respondents in the 30–34 age group reported lower sabotage than those in the 20–24 age group ( $-0.40, p < 0.05$ ), and that respondents in the 34–39 age group reported lower sabotage than those in the 20–24 age group ( $-0.44, p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables.

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Narcissism	2.76	0.63								
2. Machiavellianism	3.07	0.68	0.33***							
3. Psychopathy	2.20	0.65	0.31***	0.57***						
4. POS	3.43	0.96	0.24***	-0.12	-0.15*					
5. CWB sabotage	1.22	0.48	0.14*	0.17*	0.41***	-0.17*				
6. CWB withdrawal	1.82	0.73	0.08	0.23***	0.34***	-0.23***	0.48***			
7. CWB PD	1.29	0.50	0.17*	0.27***	0.45***	-0.31***	0.71***	0.53***		
8. CWB theft	1.21	0.44	0.14*	0.17*	0.41***	-0.27***	0.75***	0.48***	0.67***	
9. CWB abuse	1.26	0.40	0.10	0.21**	0.46***	-0.26***	0.70***	0.56***	0.67***	0.79***

Note. *N* = 208. POS = perceived organizational support; CWB = counterproductive work behavior; PD = production deviance.

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

### 3. Results

In Table 1, we present the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables. As shown in Table 1, each of the Dark Triad (DT) traits were positively correlated with one another, and POS was negatively correlated with each CWB dimension. Given the positive correlations among the three DT traits (O'Boyle et al., 2012), we controlled for the other two DT traits when testing a hypothesis (cf. Jones & Paulhus, 2011). We used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test our hypotheses (e.g., Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011). As observed variables in SEM analyses, the main effects were the scale composites (means) and the interaction terms were calculated by multiplying the predictor (i.e., one of the DT dimensions) by the moderator (i.e., POS). To account for measurement error in the model, the random error variance of each of the observed variables was fixed to the quantity that is the product of one minus the scale's coefficient alpha by the scale variance (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1982). To maintain an adequate sample-size-to-parameters' ratio of 5:1 (Bentler & Chou, 1988), we tested three structural models each of which had one of the Dark Triad traits as the predictor while controlling for the other two DT traits.<sup>2</sup>

In Hypothesis 1, we proposed that POS would moderate the relationship between narcissism and CWB such that the relationship would be stronger when POS was low rather than high. As shown in Fig. 1, after controlling for Machiavellianism and psychopathy, the unstandardized estimate of interaction effects was significant for production deviance ( $-0.13, p < 0.01$ ), but not for the other four types of CWB. This structural model provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 28.57, df = 14, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.04$ ). We plotted the moderating effect of POS on production deviance across high and low levels of narcissism ( $\pm 1$  SD; Aiken & West, 1991). Fig. 2 shows that the positive association between narcissism and production deviance was stronger when POS was low. It is noteworthy that narcissism was positively related to each of the CWB types whereas POS was negatively related to each. Taken together, we found support for Hypothesis 1 for production deviance, but not for the other types of CWB.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that POS would moderate the positive relationship between Machiavellianism and CWB such that the relationship would be stronger when POS was low rather than high. As shown in Fig. 3, after controlling for narcissism and psychopathy, the interaction effects were significant for production deviance ( $-0.10, p < 0.05$ ) and theft ( $-0.10, p < 0.05$ ). This model provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 21.64, df = 11, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.05$ ). Unexpectedly, Machiavellianism was negatively related to CWB types after controlling for narcissism and psychopathy. These results suggested the negative relationship between Machiavellianism and production

deviance (or theft) was stronger when POS is low. Thus, we did not found support for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that POS would moderate the relationship between psychopathy and CWB such that the relationship would be stronger when POS was low rather than high. As shown in Fig. 4, after controlling for narcissism and Machiavellianism, the interaction effects were significant for sabotage ( $-0.11, p < 0.05$ ), production deviance ( $-0.19, p < 0.001$ ), and theft ( $-0.15, p < 0.001$ ), but not for withdrawal or abuse. This model provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 26.26, df = 12, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.04$ ). We plotted the moderating effect of POS on theft across high and low levels of psychopathy. Fig. 5 shows that the association between psychopathy and theft was stronger when POS was low. The plots of moderating effects of POS on production deviance and sabotage are similar so were not included. Again, psychopathy was positively related to each of CWB types whereas POS was negatively related to each. Taken together, we found support for Hypothesis 3 for three types of CWB (i.e. sabotage, production deviance, and theft), but not for the other two types.

### 4. Discussion

Although prior research suggests that the Dark Triad personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are associated with CWB (O'Boyle et al., 2012), most studies have focused on the target of the behavior rather than the type of behavior. We make a novel contribution by examining these relationships based on types of CWB, rather than the target. Our results indicate that employees who possess high narcissism or psychopathy tend to report higher levels of CWB in all specific types of CWB (i.e., sabotage, production deviance, withdrawal, theft, and abuse) after controlling for shared variance of other two DT traits, and that POS is negatively related to all types of CWB. Although the correlations between Machiavellianism and all types of CWB were significantly positive, we found that the relationship between Machiavellianism and CWB was negative when controlling for narcissism and psychopathy, suggesting that shared variance between Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism may impact the extent to which Machiavellians engage in CWB.

In our study, we also found that narcissism was positively correlated to POS, whereas psychopathy was negatively correlated to POS. Machiavellianism was not significantly correlated to POS. The tendency for individuals who score high on psychopathy and Machiavellianism to also score low on conscientiousness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) may help explain the negative correlations with POS. In comparison, narcissistic individuals tend to engage in self-enhancement behaviors such as over-claiming, seeing themselves as natural leaders, and worthy of attention. Therefore, it is possible that narcissists' self-enhancement bias tendencies (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) may play a role in their slightly more positive perception of POS and their view of the organization as valuing their contributions and noticing the importance of their work.

<sup>2</sup> We also tested our models using bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) in 2000 bootstrap samples, and the results were comparable across analyses with the sole exception that the interaction effect was significant for theft ( $-0.07, 95\% CI [-0.15, -0.01]$ ) in Fig. 1 using bootstrapping.

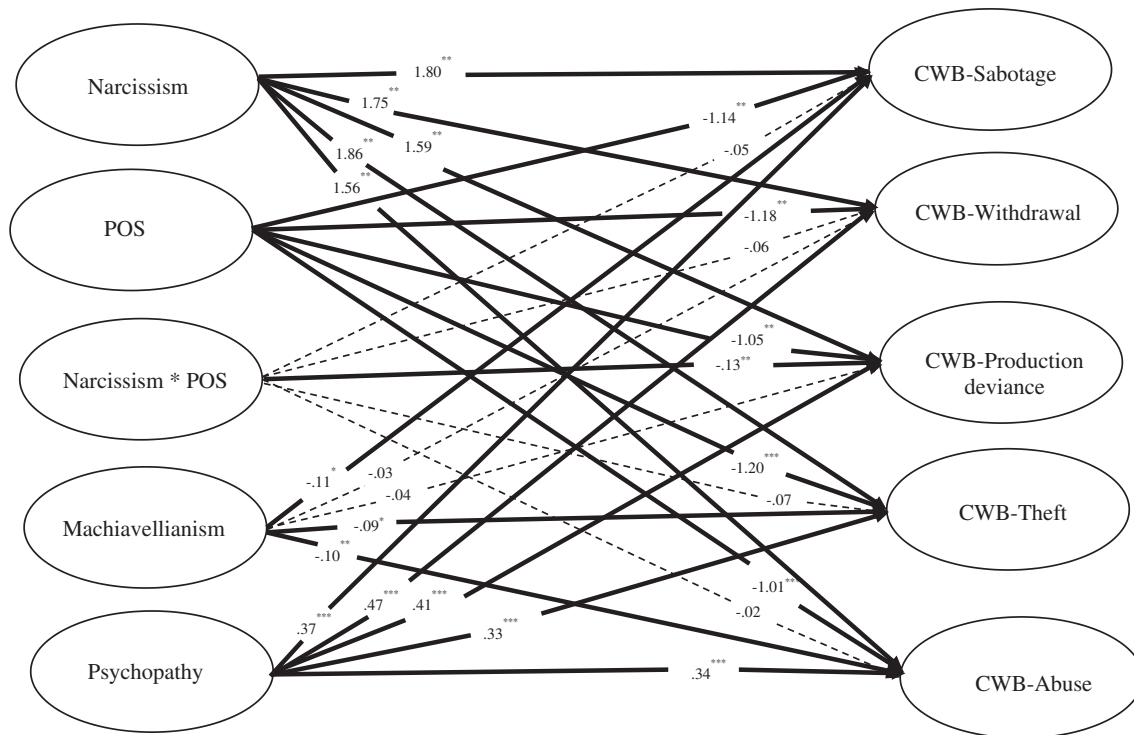


Fig. 1. Structural path estimates of Hypothesis 1. Unstandardized path coefficients are reported. POS = perceived organizational support. CWB = counterproductive work behavior. Solid lines denote significant paths; dashed lines denote nonsignificant paths. \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Our moderation analyses indicated that employees with higher levels of narcissistic and psychopathic traits who also reported higher levels of POS engaged in fewer CWB for some, but not all types of behaviors relative to their narcissistic and psychopathic counterparts with low POS. For example, narcissistic employees who perceived their organization as supportive reported engaging less frequently only in production deviance behaviors (e.g., purposely working slowly). One possible explanation for such a finding is the link between narcissism and extraversion (Grijalva, Harms, Newman, Gaddis, & Fraley, 2014). Given that these employees enjoy being around others, the perception of a supportive workplace may feed their egos and inhibit their tendencies to

engage in production deviance behaviors. Further, POS had a moderating influence on the relationships between psychopathy and sabotage, production deviance, and theft. This suggests that employees who are typically impulsive and lacking in empathy and likely to commit the highest level of counterproductive behaviors may respond more positively to a work environment that they perceive as supportive and genuinely concerned with their well-being by a slight inhibition of CWB relative to their low POS counterparts. Alternatively, it is possible that they may be biding their time and waiting to exploit the supportive environment for personal gain in the future. It is worth noting that, although individuals high in narcissism and psychopathy were still more likely to engage in CWB than their lower-scoring counterparts, these employees reported reduced frequency of their CWB when they perceived the organization as supportive.

Surprisingly, the Machiavellianism-CWB relationships were significantly negative, although the interaction effects were significant for production deviance and theft. Such results were in the opposite direction than expected. These results indicate that perhaps employees who use manipulative and deceitful tactics are more likely to intentionally work slowly or take an organization's valuables without permission as a way of taking advantage of an organization that they perceive as being supportive of their contributions. Machiavellians tend to be less impulsive than narcissists and psychopaths (Jones & Paulhus, 2011) and may feel that POS makes them indispensable; thus, more worthy of special treatment. Another explanation may relate to social desirability such that Machiavellians lie (more than narcissists and psychopaths) on self-report CWBs (cf. Smith, Wallace, & Jordan, 2016). Joining Smith et al., we call for future research to examine the complex effects of Machiavellianism on outcomes.

Collectively, our findings suggest that the perception of organizational support may have a relatively inhibiting effect on some types of CWBs associated with narcissism (i.e., production deviance) and psychopathy (i.e., sabotage, production deviance, and theft). Specifically, employees with high POS scores (relative to their trait equivalent low POS counterparts) may perceive fewer situational triggers (e.g., ego threat for narcissists and physical provocation for psychopaths; Jones

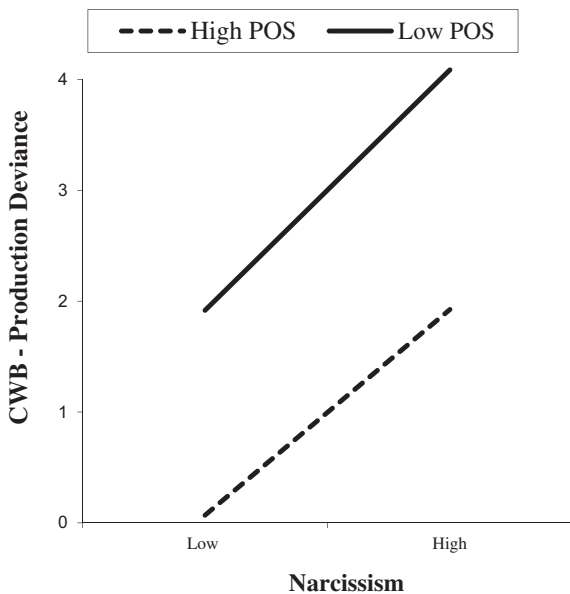


Fig. 2. Moderating effects of perceived organizational support (POS) on the relationship between narcissism and counterproductive work behavior (CWB) production deviance.



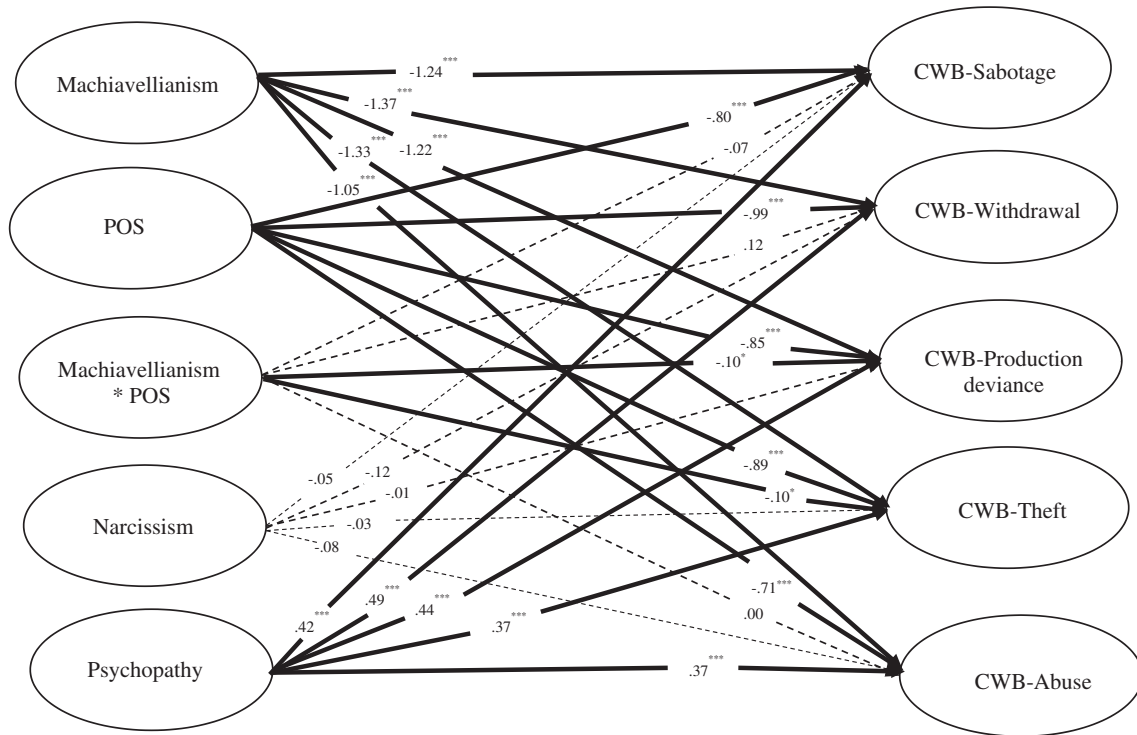


Fig. 3. Structural path estimates of Hypothesis 2. Unstandardized path coefficients are reported. POS = perceived organizational support. CWB = counterproductive work behavior. Solid lines denote significant paths; dashed lines denote nonsignificant paths. \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

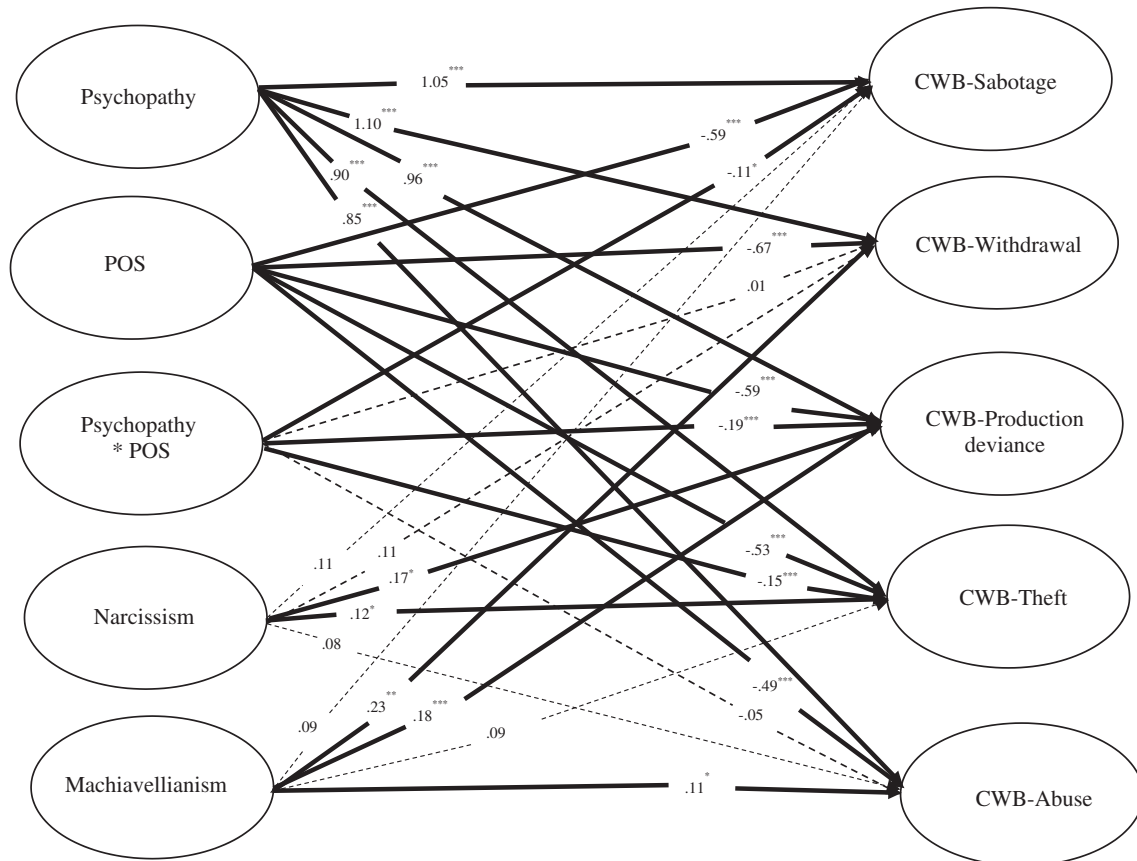


Fig. 4. Structural path estimates of Hypothesis 3. Unstandardized path coefficients are reported. POS = perceived organizational support. CWB = counterproductive work behavior. Solid lines denote significant paths; dashed lines denote nonsignificant paths. \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

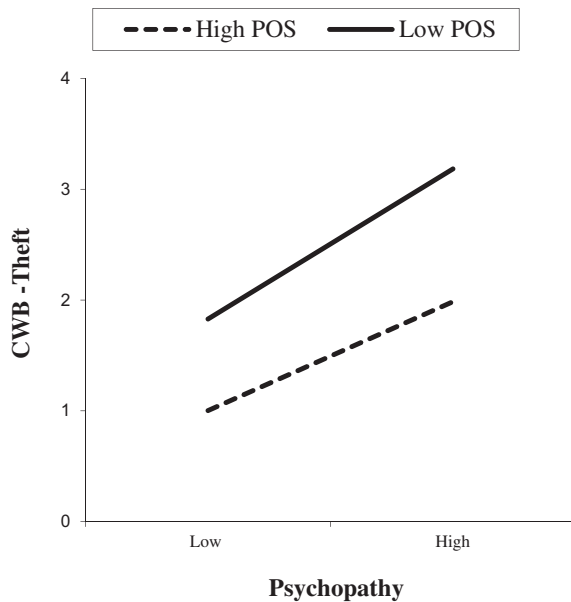


Fig. 5. Moderating effects of perceived organizational support (POS) on the relationship between psychopathy and counterproductive work behavior (CWB) theft.

& Paulhus, 2010) or work in environments that have stronger organizational cultures and have more rules and controls in place regarding CWB. Finally, there may be strategic motivations to reduce CWB in high POS contexts. Perhaps narcissists and psychopaths see high POS environments as an opportunity to climb upward within the organization and gain power that can be used for personal gain. These results highlight the value of the person-situation interactionist model, social exchange theory, and trait activation theory by showing that POS can inhibit the otherwise typical expression of CWB among individuals with higher levels of narcissism and psychopathy. However, we do acknowledge that these findings are relative based upon equivalent levels of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy suggesting that the risk associated with employees high on these traits is still greater than the risk associated with individuals' low on these traits.

#### 4.1. Implications

Our study makes a key contribution by addressing the call for research examining the role of contextual factors (O'Boyle et al., 2012) on the relationship between the Dark Triad personality traits and CWB. Further, from the results of our study, we conclude that POS represents an important contextual factor that may inhibit the expression of some types of CWB among individuals high in narcissism and psychopathy traits relative to their low POS counterparts. Regarding practical implications, we suggest that perhaps managers may be able to reduce the frequency of narcissistic and psychopathic employees' CWB by focusing efforts on increasing employee POS. However, regardless of POS, employees scoring high on the Dark Triad traits are still likely to commit a higher frequency of CWB than employees who score low on the Dark Triad traits.

#### 4.2. Limitations and future research

We acknowledge some limitations that might be addressed in future research. First, common-method variance may have affected responses as participants provided responses at only one point in time; future studies could obtain data using different types of measures or at different points in time. Second, even with anonymous responding, the use of self-report measures allows for potential errors or biases in response patterns. Future research may consider collecting data from multiple sources and including behavioral or observational measures. Third, we

tested our hypotheses separately to maintain an adequate sample-size-to-parameters ratio (Bentler & Chou, 1988). When sample size is appropriate, future research may benefit from testing the hypotheses all together or examining higher-order level relationships between dark triad factor and CWB factor (e.g., Figueredo, Gladden, Sisco, Patch, & Jones, 2015; Jonason, Kavanagh, Webster, & Fitzgerald, 2011). Fourth, as data were collected using MTurk, a web-based service, only individuals with access to this web service could participate. Future studies may benefit from utilizing traditional organizational samples. Fifth, due to the cross-sectional nature of the study design, we cannot infer causality between the variables being examined.

Our study focused on POS as a moderator on the relationship between the traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy with CWB, and demonstrated its significance as a source of contextual influence. A promising future direction could include exploring additional contextual factors such as perceived coworker support, leadership, and human resource management systems (e.g., job design, compensation) as moderators of the Dark Triad-CWB relationships. Finally, future research could examine why people high in the Dark Triad traits engage in CWB (e.g., social dominance, resource acquisition, revenge) and investigate variables such as ego threat, provocation, and the strategic value of visible actions as potential mediators of the Dark Triad-CWB relationship.

## 5. Conclusions

We found that employees possessing higher levels of narcissism reported engaging in fewer production deviance behaviors and employees high in psychopathy reported engaging in fewer sabotage, production deviance, and theft behaviors when they perceived high levels of organizational support relative to trait-equivalent employees perceiving lower organizational support. These findings support the person-situation interactionist model and suggest that individual perception of the work environment plays a role in understanding when and why narcissistic and psychopathic employees' usual tendencies toward higher levels of counterproductive work behaviors might be inhibited somewhat. As research on dark personality traits continues to develop, we hope that our research might stimulate further inquiries into the role of contextual factors in the Dark Triad-counterproductive work behavior relationship.

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