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**BEWARE OF THE EMPTY LOOK:  
THE MEDIATION ROLE OF DEPERSONALIZATION IN  
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DARK TRIAD  
PERSONALITY FACTORS AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE  
WORK BEHAVIOURS**

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**Abstract**

The current study analyzes the contribution of dark triad (DT) personality traits (Narcissism, Psychopathy and Machiavellianism) in the occurrence of counterproductive work (CWB) behaviors in the organizations, as well as the mediation role of the emotional disconnection in the relation between dark triad personality facets and organizational deviance.

The results of this study had shown that out of the three traits of the dark triad, the psychopathy plays the most important role and is the only facets responsible for the occurrence of CWB among employees. When acting as a mediator, there was shown a total effect of depersonalization in the relationship between the DT personality facets and CWB.

The research has practical implications connected directly with reducing organizational negative outcomes and, therefore, promoting a healthy, more productive and inclusive atmosphere at work with a focus on diminishing the organizational and personal costs related to negative outcomes.

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**Keywords:** Dark Triad (DT), Psychopathy, Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB), Depersonalization, Burnout, Mediation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the goals that is increasingly in the attention of organizations is the reduction of costs, but not all types of costs have roots of a financial nature. Some

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of them are correlated with behavioural aspects, especially when these aspects, through their negative nature, produce negative outcomes in the workplace, such as: absenteeism, failure to follow instructions, theft, physical and verbal aggression, dissatisfaction and criticism of colleagues and superiors, intentional misuse of information etc. (Fox et al., 2001; Gruys & Sackett, 2003; Spector & Fox, 2002; Spector et al., 2006).

Also, there are studies that showed that personality traits play an important role in explaining and addressing counterproductive behaviours of employees in the workplace, through causality that links negative personality traits with imbalances occurrence in organizations (Fida et al., 2014).

Consequently, the need to assess the maladaptive personality traits, known in the literature as "dark" (even if sub-clinical), led to the development of psychological testing tools meant to assess other individual differences that are not part of the Big Five model (Judge et al., 2009). Therefore, over the time, different models and approaches have been created to assess and explain the dark side of the personality (Spain et al., 2013), among the most well-known being the Dark Triad of Personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Relatively new as a concept, the Dark Triad of Personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) consists of three personality traits (Narcissism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy), that, in this context, should be understood as sub-clinical in nature, their common feature being *aversion*. The manifestation of these features occurs in individuals who are placed in stressful situations or when their control mechanisms are extremely weak. Their presence usually has a negative impact on the long-term results, but, in some contexts, they can facilitate the achievement of short-term goals.

Recent research has highlighted that one of the main causes of negative behaviours in the organization is the presence of depersonalization. Being a symptom of burnout syndrome, depersonalization is manifested mainly by an "unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's service, care, treatment, or instruction" (Maslach et al., 1996).

### 1.1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DT AND CWB'S OCCURENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

The interest played by the influence of dark facets of personality in the occurrence of CWB in organizations has grown in recent decades. Paulhus and Williams (2002) considered the DT personality as a multidimensional construct, but other authors report models that include the DT as a unique factor (Wu & Lebreton, 2011).

Talking about the occurrence of deviant behaviours in organizations labelled as *psychopathic traits*, some authors point out that people who score high on these traits are generally interested in their own needs, affecting the smooth running of activities

in a company through lack of responsibility and distraction from the set objectives (O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Also, in their relationship with authority, defined here as the relationship between employee and superior, people with high scores find it easier to get involved in antisocial behaviours than when their position in the company gives them a chance to achieve their goals. Thus, we can say that impulsivity and aggression are two other defining characteristics of psychopaths, which are activated against the background of possible frustrations arising from failure to achieve their own goals and interests. In this sense, Hare and Neuman (2009) note the emergence of physical and verbal abuse as an effect of low emotional tolerance, as well as cognitive non-integration of social norms.

In a recent study, it was reported a significant correlation between the occurrence of counterproductive behaviours of employees in the medical system and the abusive management of narcissistic managers (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2017), that are prone to exploit others by taking side more to their own personal agenda than the one of the organization (Khoo & Burch, 2008). Moreover, there is a similarity between them and leaders with psychopathic personality traits. Arrogance, the need for recognition, low empathy, belief in a special status and lack of moral integrity are not the best attributes when discussing the qualities of a leader. Thus, the appearance of counterproductive behaviours on the part of employees can also take the form of a protest against the conduct of superiors, since toxic leadership, as the one inferred by the leaders with high levels of DT personality is possible only if *susceptible followers* are present (Padilla et al., 2007).

## 2. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

### 2.1. OBJECTIVE

By exploring the implications related to depersonalization in the relation between DT and CWB, we aim to add and deepen the existing body of literature on the occurrence and management of CWB.

### 2.2. HYPOTHESES

Considering the negative effects of counterproductive behaviours in the workplace and the potential influence on DT personality on their outset (Mennecke et al., 2016), we formulate the following hypotheses:

**H1:** We assume that the three facets of the DT, *H1a*) Narcissism, *H1b*) Machiavellianism, *H1c*) Psychopathy, predict the occurrence of organizational deviance (CWBO).

**H2:** We consider that the three facets of the DT, *H2a*) Narcissism, *H2b*) Machiavellianism, *H2c*) Psychopathy, predict the occurrence of the deviance focused on the individual (CWBI).

Also, considering the results of, even if limited-numbered, existing studies in which depersonalization was studied separately from the whole construct of burnout in relation with CWB and researchers pointed out the existence of positive correlation between these two variables (Ugwu & Okafor, 2017; Banks et al., 2012), we believe depersonalization can affect the good development of activities in an organization, the emotional disconnection leading to the weakening of interpersonal relationships. Depersonalization acts as “a shield to protect the individual from possible negative experiences when in contact with another person” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) as well as “a coping strategy through which the employee distances himself from the company's requirements, thus preventing further depletion of emotional resources” (Bolton et al., 2011). Building on these results, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3:** We assume that depersonalization mediates the relationship between the presence of DTP and the occurrence of *H3a*) organizational deviance (CWBO) as well as *H3b*) deviance focused on the individual (CWBI).

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. PARTICIPANTS

The study sample consisted of 127 Romanian individuals ( $M_{age} = 38.04$ ,  $SD = 9.94$ ), 53,5% women. The data were collected via an online questionnaire placed on a virtual platform. The snowball technique was used for the recruitment of the participants, ensuring the confidentiality. The study sample was diverse from the sectors of the activity point of view, the participants reporting running their activity in industries such as: financial-banking, medical, marketing-PR-advertising, administrative, legal, industrial, communications and telecommunications, construction and real estate, agriculture, trade, HoReCa, education, culture, entertainment, transport and IT.

#### 3.2. MEASURES

**Dark Triad Personality** (DTP) was measured with the short version of the homonym Questionnaire (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Alpha Cronbach coefficients ranged from  $\alpha = .59$  for the sub-scale of Narcissism (9 items) and for the sub-scale of Psychopathy (9 items), to  $\alpha = .79$  for the sub-scale of Machiavellianism (10 items). A 5-point Likert scale was used with 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree. The low fidelity registered for Psychopathy and Narcissism sub-scales was reported in several studies, that can mainly be due to the obviously negative content of the item and the particular interpretation of each respondent of the questions in the questionnaire. Therefore, their use in our statistical analyzes was performed considering these premises (Ying & Cohen, 2018).

**Counterproductive work behaviors** were measured using the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (CWB-C, Fox et al., 2001). The 45

questions version has two sub-scales: the first one, assessing the deviance, namely the counterproductive work-behaviors, directed against individuals (CWB-I) and a second sub-scale that evaluates the deviance directed against the organization (CWB-O).

The CWB-C items are evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 is Never and 5 is Daily. The Alpha Cronbach calculated on the current study data was  $\alpha = .93$  for the entire CWB-C scale,  $\alpha = .87$  for CWB-O and  $\alpha = .91$  for CWB-I.

**Depersonalization** was evaluated through the homonym sub-scale from the Maslach Burnout Inventory, MBI (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). This subscale contains 5 items and describes the detached and impersonal treatment of the individual towards other people. The Alpha Cronbach coefficient on the current study data was  $\alpha = .75$ , with a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 is Never and 7 is Daily.

### 3.3. DATA ANALYSIS

The statistical analysis was carried out in SPSS. In the first stage, we calculated the total score for each variable and the coefficient Alpha Cronbach. Next, we run a correlation analysis between the study. To test the hypotheses, in the last two stages of the data analysis we used multiple linear regression analysis using the stepwise method (step by step) introducing into the system only independent variables that had statistically significant correlations with the two dependent variables. In the last stage, we tested the theoretical model (Figure 1), using the add-on package for SPSS, Process v3.5 (Hayes, 2013).

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. CORRELATION ANALYSIS

The means, standard deviations, Alpha Cronbach coefficients and the correlations between study variables are included in Table 1.

Table 1 – Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations for the study variables  
(N=127)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 DTP Total	2.61	.39	(.80)						
2 Machiavellianism	2.76	.59	.87**	(.79)					
3 Narcissism	3.07	.45	.66**	.39**	(.59)				
4 Psychopathy	1.99	.49	.71**	.43**	.45**	(.59)			
5 CWB-O	1.41	.36	.34**	.29**	.08	.37**	(.87)		
6 CWB-I	1.18	.26	.35**	.31**	.02	.43**	.75**	(.91)	
7 Depersonalization	1.63	.83	.45**	.41**	.21*	.39**	.53**	.51**	(.75)

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , Alpha Cronbach coefficients in parenthesis; DTP Total = Dark Triad Personality (as a composite factor); CWB-O = counterproductive work-behaviors directed against the organization; CWB-I = counterproductive work-behaviors directed against individuals

Related to CWB-I, there are statistically significant correlations indices, positive, at a moderate level, with two out of the three facets of the DT, at a high level, in the case of Machiavellianism ( $r = .31, p < .001$ ), and in the case of Psychopathy ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ). The Narcissism does not statistically significant correlate with CWB-I ( $r = .02, p = .785$ ). Still, there is a statistically significant positive correlation, at a high level with depersonalization ( $r = .51, p < .001$ ).

Regarding the correlations associated with CWB-O, the results are similar with the results above as in the case of CWB-I, namely Machiavellianism ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ), respectively Psychopathy ( $r = .37, p < .001$ ), records statistically significant, positive correlations, of medium intensity, with a very good significance with CWB-O, the third facet, Narcissism ( $r = .80, p = .368$ ), not registering correlation in this respect. Depersonalization, similar to the results obtained for the second dimension of CWB, presents in relation to CWB-O, a statistically significant correlation, positive, of high intensity and with a very good significance ( $r = .53, p < .001$ ).

#### 4.2. REGRESSION ANALYSIS

We analyzed the existence of prediction models in the case of the occurrence of counterproductive behaviors in organizations from the perspective of personality traits of employees. Organizational counterproductive behaviors (CWB-O) and inter-individual counterproductive behaviors in organizations (CWB-I) were considered dependent variables. We generated a prediction model for each and the results are included in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. – Regression models between the personality facets of the dark triad and organizational counterproductive behaviors (CWB-O) (N=127)

Variable	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$R$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
<u>Personality</u>						
Model 1						
Psychopathy	.37	4.51***	.001	.37	.14	.14

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; CWB-O = counterproductive work-behaviors directed against the organization

As shown in Table 2, the Psychopathy proved to be the only variable that contributes significantly to the regression model,  $F_{change}(1,125) = 20.27, p < .001$ , accounting for 14% from the variance of the occurrence of CWB. The other two facets of personality, Machiavellianism and Narcissism, did not contribute significantly in their capacity as independent variables to the emergence of CWB-O, being excluded by the system. We also controlled for age and gender. Therefore, only H1c is validated.

Table 3.- Regression models between the personality facets of the dark triad and inter-individual counterproductive behaviors (CWB-I) (N=127)

Variable	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$R$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
<u>Personality</u>						
Model 1						
Psychopathy	.43	5.36***	.001	.43	.19	.19

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; CWB-I = counterproductive work-behaviors directed against individuals

According to the results included in Table 3 we observe a similarity with the results obtained for H1, meaning that the Psychopathy is the only variable that contributes significantly to the regression model  $F_{change}(1,125) = 28.78, p < .001$  and is responsible for 19% of the variance the occurrence of counterproductive behaviors at the inter-individual level within organizations. Also, Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and demographic variables, similar to the results obtained in the first hypothesis, were excluded from the system. Also, only H2c is validated.

#### 4.3. TESTING THE MEDIATION MODEL

To test H3, we used the simple mediation method, using the Process v3.5 procedures (Hayes, 2013), in the SPSS. The procedure involves analyzing the independent and the dependent variable, as well as the mediator according to the stimulus-conditions-response model, and assumes that between treatment (cause) and result (effect) there is an interactive process of a certain complexity. In our case, the independent variable, DT, was analyzed as a global factor, the dependent variables were the two forms of counterproductive behaviors (CWB-O and CWB-I) and the mediating variable was considered the Depersonalization. The proposed mediation model is included in Figure 1.

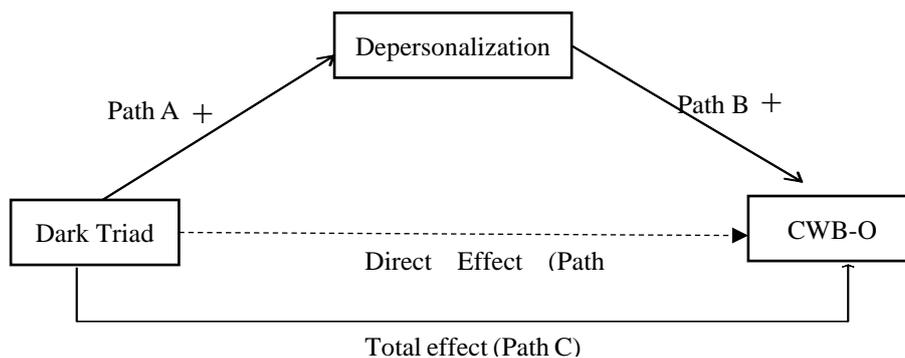


Figure 1 – Theoretical model for H3. Although the term "effect" may suggest a causal relationship, no inferences about causality are intended. The terminology introduced by Preacher and Hayes (2008) is used for reasons of consistency and clarification.

We used bootstrapping procedure with the number of 1000 samples set to generate the 95% confidence intervals. These are recommended in the content of the analysis because in this way the normality characteristic is no longer required as regards the distribution of the sample for which the indirect effect is calculated.

The results shown that depersonalization totally mediated the relationship between DTP and CWB through the two pathways (A and B), both of statistical significance, of a positive nature.

The result of the mediation analysis indicates that in the case of the relationship between DTP and CWB-O, the direct effect becomes statistically not significant ( $B = .11, p = .141$ , with a confidence interval between  $-.04$  and  $.26$ ) when the relationship is mediated by the depersonalization. Also, the indirect effect remains statistically significant ( $B = .19, p < .001$ , with a confidence interval between  $.09$  and  $.32$ ), indicating the existence of a total mediation relationship.

In the case of the result of the mediation analysis of the H3b, we observed that in the relationship between DTP and CWB-I, similar to the previously obtained results, the direct effect becomes statistically insignificant ( $B = .10, p = .078$ , with an interval trust located between  $-.02$  and  $.22$ ), when the situation is controlled through the mediator. The indirect effect remains statistically significant ( $B = .13, p < .001$ , with a confidence interval between  $.05$  and  $.25$ ), indicating in this case the presence of a total mediation relationship.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

According to the results recorded after testing the H1 and H2 hypotheses, we found that Psychopathy is the only facet of the dark personality that predicts the occurrence of dysfunctional behaviors in the Romanian organizational, in a proportion of 14% in case of counterproductive behaviors directed against the organization (CWB-O) and in a proportion of 19% regarding the occurrence of counterproductive behaviors directed against the individuals (CWB-I). Regarding the other two facets of the personality, both Machiavellianism and Narcissism did not register statistically significant results regarding the CWB prediction, consequently H1 and H2 being only partially confirmed. These results are in agreement with those obtained by Özsoy (2018) in a study conducted in the organizational environment of Turkey, in which Psychopathy ( $B = .20, p < .001$ ) was the single one of DT personality that predicted 7% of the occurrence of CWB.

In supporting and explaining the above situation, other studies had shown that the involvement of Psychopathy, in a sub-clinical context, is more likely to trigger destructive behaviors in organizations than the Machiavellian or Narcissistic side, due, in particular, to the impulsivity and the aggression specific to this DT facet. Miller et al. (2016) stated that although Machiavellianism and Psychopathy have common elements, such as hedonism or impulsivity, low scores are also reported in terms of agreeableness or conscientiousness, Machiavellian individuals can wait

longer periods of time to and achieve goals despite the frustrations that arise. Therefore, we can assume that the manipulative and duplicitous attitude of Machiavellians can harm the companies in which they are employed, but it is much more likely that in the case of Psychopathy these dysfunctional behaviors appear faster, have a greater consistency given the low tolerance for frustration, as well as low impulse control, which can lead to more unpredictable and toxic behaviors. The same authors came to the conclusion that Psychopathy is the darkest element of this triad.

In contrast to the results of our study, in a recent study, Ying and Cohen (2018) reported the occurrence of CWB under the influence of Machiavellianism ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ) for CWB-I and ( $r = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ) for CWB-O. Similar to our results included in Table 2, a multiple linear regression analysis showed that both Narcissism and Psychopathy were excluded by the statistical system. Regarding the Narcissism, a meta-analysis reported its prediction in the onset of CWB, Psychopathy and Machiavellianism being excluded following the regression analysis (Grijalva & Newman, 2014). Therefore, we can observe both similarities and contrasts in terms of comparing the results of the present study with other international studies, among the possible explanations of these findings being the cultural and professional differences of each sample investigated.

The results of the current study highlight the role played by dark personality traits in triggering counterproductive behaviors in the organizations from the Romanian business environment. Thus, both in agreement and in contrast to the results of other similar studies we discussed during this research, we can conclude that at the facet level, psychopathy is the most important element of this triad, responding to the occurrence of CWB among employees in Romania.

As a mediator, the effect of depersonalization has a major impact when it mediates the relationship between two already connoted negative variables, respectively DT and CWB, amplifying the relationship between them. Therefore, following the signs of depersonalization manifested by employees can be one of the most effective strategies to prevent the occurrence of counterproductive behaviors and, respectively, the extremely high costs associated with them. As a last resort, following the numb gaze, fixed, empty look of employees who are already showing signs of burnout in the form of depersonalization may be the key to prophylaxis in the occurrence of important negative results at the organizational level.

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