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# “Corporate Psychopaths” in Public Agencies?

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*Corporate leaders with psychopathic traits are the subject of a growing scientific literature. Recently, scholars have begun to examine such personalities in public agencies. In this article, we relate psychopathic public leaders to research on toxic and destructive leadership, leader personality disorder, and the Dark Triad/Tetrad of psychopathic, narcissistic, Machiavellian, and sadistic personalities. Via a brief scenario, we illustrate how the term “corporate psychopath” might be used by lay employees lacking psychiatric expertise as a catchall term for any one of the four dark types in a leadership role. We argue that dark personalities are found in public agency leadership and could perhaps be increasing in numbers. We highlight their prejudice toward immigrants and implications for public policy affecting minority groups. After outlining organizational responses discussed in the literature, we consider servant leadership as a screening strategy to help select constructive public leaders. Some areas for future research are suggested.*

Signs of aberrant personality in a leader are likely to arouse disquiet, disbelief, and uncertain response in an organization. One way this might play out is dramatized in the following account from a fictional chief executive officer (CEO) of a large public agency in a major metropolitan area:

*Dear colleagues: In our affinity group meeting today, I described the attached report on “corporate psychopaths” and offered to email a copy. It was prepared for my management succession planning program by human resources director Jeremiah Armstrong “Jag” Goodman. A PhD candidate in public human resources management, he adapted his dissertation literature review as a report on organizational psychopaths to inaugurate an in-house executive briefing series for our agency. Its basis is an experience in our own leadership.*

*Shortly before I became CEO last year, my predecessor appointed as acting director of one of our departments a grants analyst who had joined the agency six months before. The newcomer was a witty, self-assured, dashing-looking male I’ll call RX Dekazens. In short*

order, the view formed among much of the senior leadership that he was a prime candidate for permanent director, despite his short tenure. Initially, I too was impressed with what I saw in our brief acquaintance. Then rumors arose from the department to darken the picture. Out of my sight, so it was claimed, Dekazens had launched a reign of terror starting the day he took over – manipulating procedures, bullying opponents of his decisions, lying compulsively over even trivia, and lavishing favors on followers, notably an abrasive young new-hire he made his unofficial deputy and jestingly called “my Hit Person.”

I first got wind of things from Jag a few hours after he had met in private with three agitated program managers. In a tense hour-long session, they walked him through a litany of alleged abuse of targeted employees, favoritism, misspending, and abuse of targeted employees. Reportedly, on his first day as director, Dekazens smiled at a young Hispanic secretary as he fired her. Jag said one of the managers, an Asian immigrant, still seemed traumatized after Dekazens supposedly attacked him verbally when he questioned the firing in a meeting. The trio gave Jag a book by business scholar Clive Boddy entitled *Corporate Psychopaths: Organizational Destroyers*, and another called *Confessions of a Sociopath* by one M.E. Thomas. Both were full of underlining with “Dekazens!” inked in the margins. In asking to meet, they had hoped for a commitment to an audit of management and spending, but they accepted Jag’s advice that he confer with me about how to proceed. For his part, Jag felt certain that if I failed to respond, “the place will blow up.”

My first question was to ask if the complainants were credible. Jag, a longtime executive who knows the organization well, replied that all had good reputations. When I asked him what he made of Dekazens, he said he seemed “brilliant,” and that this was the first he had heard about any unrest in the department. He noted that before being hired, Dekazens had worked in half a dozen municipalities in the region, a few years at most in each place. Jag was never entirely clear about how much of the administrative experience on his résumé included actual management responsibilities. But “courted and dazzled by his charm” (as Jag put it), the former CEO made Dekazens temporary director.

Until then, I had never heard of a corporate psychopath, or whatever would be a term for it in the public sector. Naturally, I’ve known managers with difficult or fractious personalities. But with one exception – a director at a previous agency who underwent psychiatric counseling through the Employee Assistance Program, results of which remained confidential under the Americans with Disabilities Act – I was unaware of ever having a direct report with possible personality disorder. With the search for director soon to open, I had to decide what to do. If Dekazens was the administrative talent he seemed, and the claims had no merit, there was no reason he should not apply. But, if allegations from the department were even partly true, I would regard him as too much of a potential liability to accept as a director.

The day after hearing Jag’s news, I informed Dekazens of the complaints. I said that assuming he wished to be considered as a candidate for permanent director, I must initiate an internal inquiry. I was as empathetic as I could be with a senior executive I viewed as innocent unless investigation showed otherwise. In response, he briefly described how an alleged “crony network” including the three informants was resisting what he called his “business innovations.” Then, he said that he doubted he would meet experience requirements for permanent director, and so intended to seek an executive job somewhere else. He hoped I would be willing to provide a positive reference. It was an amicable enough meeting that still left me chilled by something in Dekazens, an unblinking look, I’d never seen before.

*Announcement of his impending departure seemed to be welcomed by the department, apart from some avid supporters who were made unhappy and likely nervous about what might happen next. Before his successor arrived, Dekazens left to become executive director of a small out-of-state foundation, at considerably higher salary, it was rumored. His replacement, a female, inherited some trace departmental discord, but has been adroit in smoothing relations. In a first symbolic move, she eased out Dekazens's Hit Person shortly after taking office. The events so struck Jag, the only other senior executive who knew what had happened, that it defined his dissertation: a study of what public agencies may face when such a personality – whatever exactly Dekazens may have been – becomes a leader. We reflected on the "JAG Report" in a recent leadership development retreat. Participants found it sobering. So, I anticipate, will your leadership team.*

*Eden Leeder, Chief Executive Officer*

The preceding tale might seem to portray a so-called corporate psychopath. According to Boddy (2011), "they are glib and superficially charming; have a grandiose sense of self-worth; are pathological liars, good at conning and manipulating others; have no remorse about harming others; are emotionally shallow, calculating and cold; are callous and lacking in empathy; and fail to take responsibility for their own actions" (7-8).

But the case might also depict something else: another of what psychology calls the Dark Triad or Tetrad of psychopathic, narcissistic, Machiavellian, and – added recently – sadistic personalities. All four are callous and lack empathy. All are "runaway agentics" who pursue private goals in self-aggrandizing, duplicitous ways (Paulhus 2014). Unlike constructive leaders (Einarsen et al. 2007) who value cooperative social exchange as a basis of workplace effectiveness, dark leaders willingly undermine it based on their valuation of the rewards and cost of doing so (Jonason, Li and Teicher 2010; O'Boyle et al. 2011). Yet, however aggressive, aversive, or malevolent their behavior may be, it still falls within a *subclinical* or "normal 'everyday' range" that does not trigger psychiatric diagnosis and treatment for personality disorder or violate the law (Paulhus 2014, 421). As they "get ahead" by failing at "getting along," their admixture of ability and dark traits may make for a seemingly "successful" psychopath (Lilienfeld et al. 2015) or narcissist, Machiavellian, or sadist. Even when coworkers sense something aberrant behind a dark leader's mask of normality, they typically lack the expertise to tell what it is.

Recently, scholars have applied the psychological lens of behavioral public administration (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017) to analysis of such "everyday" dark leaders in the public sector. In a paper directed to public agencies, Boddy (2016) asserts that growing reliance on "shallow" recruitment and vetting processes is admitting more psychopathic types into leadership of organizations of all kinds, both corporate and governmental. Fennimore and Sementelli (2016) theorize that New Public Management (NPM) or public entrepreneurship could inadvertently be attracting leaders with psychopathic traits who seek to pursue entrepreneurial risk-taking and radical change in disruptive ways that could compromise traditional public service values. In this article, we thread these arguments into a discussion relating leader psychopathy in public agencies to writing on *toxic* and *destructive* leaders, leader personality disorder, and the Dark Triad/Tetrad. We argue that self-serving agentic behavior in all four dark leader types could compromise public agency mission and values. We call attention to prejudice of dark leaders toward immigrants and its adverse implications for minority groups they may come from. After outlining organizational responses and protections that are discussed in the literature, we consider servant leadership as a potential screening strategy to help preempt destructive personalities through selection

of constructive public leaders. Some areas for research are suggested.

In the discussion that follows, we continue our opening scenario of a practitioner's executive briefing on the knowns and unknowns of psychopaths and Dark Tetrad leaders as told in the scientific literature. Our hope is to reach public sector executives and managers most directly facing challenges posed by dark leaders, while encouraging more public administration scholarship on the issue.

Our survey is selective in that we seek to acquaint unfamiliar researchers and practitioners with some of the most relevant writing in a large literature on toxic, destructive, and personality disordered leaders. While our focus is an administrative or workplace context, we expect it will be apparent that personality concepts we scrutinize may apply as well in the electoral sphere, from subnational to national governments and even global political arenas (Lilienfeld et al. 2012).

### **Executive Briefing: Psychopathy and the Dark Tetrad in Public Agencies**

Ethical and criminal violations by contemporary leaders in all walks of life have sparked the emergence of critical business and management writing on leadership (Gudmundsson and Southey 2011). This growing literature uses kindred constructs of *toxic* and *destructive* leaders (Padilla et al. 2007) and psychiatric concepts of personality disorder and psychopathology (Goldman 2009a, 2009b) to analyze and predict offensive or aversive behavior in leaders and its destructive potential for organizations, their workforces, and constituents.

### **Toxic Leaders**

Toxic leaders are defined as “those individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviors and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and even nations they lead” (Lipman-Blumen 2005a, 2). Two books by public policy scholars are among significant sources of the toxic leader construct: *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* by Marcia Whicker (1996), late chair of the department of public administration at Rutgers University; and *The Allure of Toxic Leaders* by Jean Lipman-Blumen (2005b), professor of public policy at the Drucker School of Management. These have helped stimulate empirical study of toxic leadership, although to date little work has analyzed public agency settings (Hitchcock 2015; Pelletier 2010).

Toxic leadership has long been associated with aversive personality traits. Whicker (1996) argued that a sense of inadequacy, selfish values, and deceitfulness induce toxic leaders to try to conceal their inner nature from others. Reed's (2004) list of toxic military leader characteristics suggests an origin in personality more than external causes: lack of concern for subordinates (callousness); interpersonal style that depletes organizational trust, morale and engagement (abusiveness, deceit); and conviction among subordinates that the leader's motivations are self-serving (selfishness, opportunism). Harlen (2011) characterizes toxicity as psychological malevolence toward others. Kets de Vries (2014) frames it in a context of “mental health” of narcissistic, antisocial, and several other personality disorders and comparative prospects for successful psychotherapy – promising in the case of some narcissistic leaders, less so with psychopaths and sociopaths (Meloy 1988; Paris 2013). Jonason et al. (2012) state generally that “*Toxic* employees, as embodied by the Dark Triad traits, present problems for any company, supervisor, and fellow employee. Learning how those high on Dark Triad traits behave at work may permit preventive measures to be taken

or, at least, what to expect from them” (452)– particularly important if a dark leader continues to lead.

### **Destructive Leadership**

Destructive leadership is the “systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job-satisfaction of subordinates” (Einarsen et al. 2007, 208). Based on the 50-year-old Managerial Grid, which conceived effective and ineffective leadership in terms of people and production (Blake and Mouton 1964), the destructive leader model defines four leader archetypes in terms of their conduct toward subordinates and the organization. The *constructive* leader is the normative ideal: pro-organization and pro-subordinate, pursuing enterprise goals in conjunction with employee well-being. Contrasting with the *constructive* leader are three *destructive* leader types that may compromise organization, employees, or both.

*Tyrannical* leaders command at the cost of employees. To control or dominate they will cultivate in- and out-groups, foment distrust within or among groups (divide and conquer), or punish scapegoats to ward off others. *Supportive-disloyal* leaders are pro-subordinate but anti-organization: they may wink at shirking or misconduct or grant excess compensation or privileges while engaging in self-dealing or undermining superiors. *Derailed* leaders are anti-organization and anti-subordinate both. Einarsen et al. (2007) say, “These leaders may display anti-subordinate behaviors like bullying, humiliation, manipulation, deception or harassment, while simultaneously committing anti-organizational behaviors like absenteeism, shirking, fraud, or theft” (212 – 213).

A study testing the destructive leader model using a sample of Swedish military personnel found evidence of abusive leader behaviors that correlated with *tyrannical* and *derailed* archetypes (Larsson et al. 2012). In a review of the destructive leader literature, Krasikova et al. (2013) suggest that Dark Triad personalities are the most likely to be destructive leaders. Of these, Paulhus (2014) states that psychopaths “impulsively grab what they want, caring little if others get hurt,” while a “strategic Machiavellian takes care while taking advantage” (422)– in the first case a *derailed* leader, in the second a (cautious) *tyrannical* leader? A form of supportive-disloyal leadership may be suggested by an “ascension” strategy described by Babiak and Hare (2006), in which a psychopathic manager orchestrates a succession of coups to depose superiors for their jobs. Assuming that these destructive leader archetypes reasonably mirror organizational reality, dark personalities seem most likely to enact whichever one best fits their interpersonal style and agentic reading of how to take what they want from their environment.

### **Personality Disorder in Leaders**

In two books that use *toxic* and *destructive* more-or-less interchangeably, Goldman (2009a, 2009b) argues that the most toxic/destructive leaders are afflicted with personality disorder. The American Psychiatric Association’s (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (hereafter, *DSM*) defines this as “an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual’s culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment” (645). Goldman (2009b) poses a *toxicity continuum* of environments that range from highly functional and positive, to ones that are functional and nontoxic, to the dysfunctional and highly toxic frequently involving compromised

procedures, norms, or coworker behavior as well as leadership. Personality disordered leaders are associated with high toxicity and destructiveness. Paulhus (2014) states that *subclinical* Dark Tetrad personalities nonetheless have potential to “wreak havoc,” which would suggest greater toxicity.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines personality disorder as a form of mental disability and thus a protected category (Job Accommodation Network 2015; Goldman 2009a, 2009b). While this does not immunize an afflicted leader from discipline or termination, it may determine how employers must treat them. Under ADA, communications between a clinician treating a patient are confidential, and unless a leader is judged a danger to self or to others, a punitive employment action usually cannot be based on disability per se. Employers may also be required to provide reasonable accommodation. In case studies of business leaders with borderline, obsessive-compulsive, histrionic, intermittent explosive, body dysmorphic, and other disorders, Goldman (2009a, 2009b) illustrates diagnosis, treatment, and forms of accommodation made by employers in a variety of organizational circumstances. Goldman does not explicitly address the Dark Tetrad, either with respect to how ADA rules may apply to subclinical personalities not technically impaired or disabled by clinical personality disorder, or where dark types may fall on a toxicity continuum. But he argues that leaders with acute disorders can often be restored to productive work through therapeutic “detoxification.” He describes a success and a failure with two Dark Tetrad types: a narcissistic personality, and an executive diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD), the *DSM* category that operationalizes psychopathy for clinical diagnosis (Wall et al. 2015). In the first case, increasingly imperious behavior in a female head of cardiac surgery was disrupting her unit. Diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, outpatient psychotherapy and medication reduced her abusiveness to enable her to remain in her position. The second case involved a brash, bullying manufacturing executive Goldman judged to be a danger to self and others. The man ultimately chose to resign rather than face disclosure of ASPD to his employer and probable termination that would appear on his record. Goldman (2009a) calls for research to identify where leaders with narcissistic and antisocial disorders can “bring added value to their organizations” (153).

### **Psychopathy and the Dark Tetrad (I): Psychopaths**

Psychopathy has been recognized for centuries, once described as “madness without delirium” or “moral insanity” (Cleckley 1982; Kets de Vries 2012). The term was coined in the late 1800s to connote lack of conscience, glib charm, pathological lying, impulsiveness, and swindling in a psychopathic personality. Psychopathy may originate in genetic selection of heritable traits of aggression or fearlessness among select early humans that “would have promoted reproductive success in ancestral environments” (Blackburn 2006, 52) and helped vulnerable hunter-gatherer groups survive (Dutton 2012). Alternatively, what we call psychopathic traits may once have been a more prominent component of an evolving human genotype, but over millennia were suppressed through “capital punishment” of psychopaths by small groups threatened by victimization (Boehm 2012). In either case, the legacy is a modern human genetic makeup giving “rise to a low, but stable proportion of psychopaths in all cultures” (Blackburn 2006, 52).

The cognate term *sociopath* has often been used in place of psychopath, partly to avoid confusion with *psychotic* (Boddy 2015; Hare 1999). *Sociopathy* emerged in the 1930s to convey environmental, as distinct from genetic, origin of antisocial behavior (Lyyken 1996). It is now seen as a different, more common syndrome caused by childhood physical,

emotional, or environmental injury that disrupts normal neurological maturation (Paris 2013). Pemment (2013) argues that sociopaths do not lack conscience or sense of morality in the alleged manner of the psychopath, but they may internalize antisocial values of subcultures like criminal groups (Babiak and Hare 2006). Sociopathy and ASPD diagnoses are more strongly associated with socially deviant or violent behavior than is psychopathy (Wall et al. 2015), and most scholars have construed antisocial managers as psychopathic rather than sociopathic (Peck and Slade 2007). Psychopaths comprise about 1% of the population (Wall et al. 2015), but Babiak and Hare's (2006) oft-cited study found psychopathic traits in some 3% of high-potential business managers.

Clinicians have viewed psychopaths as characteristically manipulative, impulsive, and irresponsible, but not necessarily violent (Patrick et al. 2009). In his landmark book *The Mask of Sanity*, published in 1941 but revised into the 1980s and still cited, Cleckley (1982) wrote, "Most typical psychopaths, despite their continually repeated transgressions against the law and the rights of others and their apparent lack of moral compunction, seem to avoid murder and other grave felonies that remove them from free activity in the social group" (151). Based on psychiatric patients from middle or higher socioeconomic, not criminal, backgrounds, Cleckley developed a psychopathic profile or basic set of diagnostic criteria. In fictionalized biographical portraits using what we might today call a "slow-reveal" narrative (Cleckley called them "The Material"), he dramatized what he meant by "mask of sanity." Under clinical observation, patients who may initially seem normal or even exceptional, with no obvious external signs of inner disorder, reveal psychopathology through their behavior. In an analogous manner, unsuspecting coworkers may come to perceive that something in a leader's personality is abnormal, whether or not personality disorder is suspected or unmasked.

In Cleckley's typical account, an intelligent, socially poised young man (a few are female) begins to exhibit seemingly unmotivated delinquency: perhaps lying, forgery, fraud, theft, drug use, vandalism, drunkenness, pyromania, or promiscuity. Parents are distraught over progeny whose behavior has become alien. Caught in a violation, the patient denies, dissembles, or expresses remorse, vows to repent, then repeats, as if they cannot learn from experience. They will lie compulsively even if unnecessary, often with fascinating invention. They can express affection or love, and may seem to believe that they do love, but seem not to have any real affect (feeling) at all. Some are braggarts or try to intimidate, while others are affable without aiming to charm. They may show rage if thwarted, but it usually ebbs quickly. They are not noticeably neurotic or anxious, and are never delusional or psychotic. Outwardly, they can seem intact, but inwardly are unable to avoid repeating behavior that is destructive for themselves and for others.

### **Successful Psychopaths**

A full psychopathic personality is "unsuited for life in any community" (Patrick, 2006, 610 – 611) or, by inference, for the professions or leadership. But Cleckley (1982) also reported on a selection of patients with milder traits who had succeeded as a businessman, scientist, physician, and psychiatrist. Though all had recurring lapses in behavior (e.g., alcoholic binging, self-harming infidelity), and Cleckley believed they suffered from the underlying pathology (Hall and Benning 2006), they were able to carry on professional careers. The term *corporate psychopath* generally seems intended to connote individuals who are socially functional in this sense – in contemporary parlance, a successful or *subclinical* psychopath (Babiak and Hare 2006; Lilienfeld et al. 2015). Goldman's (2009a) charismatic ASPD executive may illustrate the type, as does the pseudonymous "high-functioning"

sociopath M.E. Thomas (2013), who writes “[I’m] intelligent enough to learn rules and learn that breaking them often has consequences that are unpleasant (282)...While I rarely break rules, I tend to bend them” (155).

Increasing numbers of studies seek to explain psychopathy that can be comparatively functional or adaptive. Cleckley’s contemporary Karpman (1941) established a basic distinction between *primary* and *secondary* psychopathy, respectively genetic emotional deficits in the brain and nervous system, and poor psychosocial learning from environment (Blackburn 2006; Wall et al. 2015). A recent study treating these as two psychopathic subtypes (see Wall et al. 2015) found that cases fell into either of two groups. An “emotionally stable” group exhibited low stress reaction and social dominance, *primary* traits associated with successful psychopaths. An “aggressive” subtype was characterized by impulsivity and high aggression, the antisocial behavior of *secondary* psychopathy, often associated with criminal offenders (Newman and Brinkley 1997).

Primary, secondary, and successful distinctions arise in Babiak and Hare’s (2006) *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*, a study of business psychopaths who were identified for the sample through the Psychopathy Check List (PCL), the “gold standard” of psychopathy tests (Newman and Brinkley 1997). Hare (1999) developed the PCL based on clinical work with psychopaths in incarcerated populations. The test aggregates Cleckley’s (1982) diagnostic criteria among four domains, and assigns scores of 0, 1, or 2 for 20 observed traits. Maximum score is 40 (psychopath); 30 is cutoff for threshold psychopathy (for non-psychopaths, average is 4). Broadly corresponding to *primary* psychopathy are *interpersonal* and *affective* domains. Interpersonally, individuals are superficial, grandiose, and deceitful. Affectively, they lack remorse or empathy and do not accept responsibility. *Lifestyle* and *antisocial* domains equate with *secondary* psychopathy. In the first, individuals are impulsive and lack goals; in the other, they exhibit poor self-control and antisocial behavior. In their account, Babiak and Hare (2006) call attention to “a predatory stare and empty eyes” in the psychopath that can unsettle observers, “suggestive of a primitive, autonomic, and fearful response to a predator.” M.E. Thomas (2013) calls this her “predator stare” (6).

A reduced version of the PCL for non-incarcerated populations was used to screen a sample of 203 business managers (Babiak and Hare 2006; Babiak et al. 2010). The research team had initially assumed that corporate rules, continuous observation, and requirements to meet goals and objectives would make an unwelcoming environment for psychopaths. To its surprise, 3 high-scoring managers qualified as psychopathic, while 9 had threshold scores, collectively well above 1% population estimates. Evidently, chances for wealth, power, or thrill-seeking attracted psychopathic personalities, while high turnover, turbulence, and flatter structures with fewer safeguards to expose them facilitated hiring and promotion. The result was more than imagined of what Babiak and Hare also call successful psychopaths, with differing scores on the PCL’s four dimensions. The trio of high-scoring cases was dubbed “classic” psychopaths. The rest with threshold scores were called either “manipulative” or “macho” depending on score patterns within the test domains – duplicitous or charming in the one, aggressive, bullying, or abrasive in the other.

Studies of psychopathic brain structure and cognition bolster conjecture that psychopathic personalities may sort by successful/unsuccessful types. Mullins-Sweatt et al. (2010) found successful psychopaths scored higher than criminal psychopaths on the conscientiousness factor of the Big Five (Five Factor) model of personality, suggesting greater self-control. Gao and Raine (2010, 204) speculate that heightened executive function in the prefrontal cortex of successful psychopaths may increase their capability to plan and

coordinate thinking to “promote their ability to lie, con, and manipulate others” without need for resort to violent behavior. In a review of neurobiological studies, Debowska et al. (2014) report that unsuccessfuls have reduced gray matter brain volume in the prefrontal cortex relative to successful types. Both have reduced volume of the amygdala in the deep brain which governs emotional response, again with smaller volume readings in unsuccessfuls. Debowska and co-authors caution that primary/secondary and successful/unsuccessful dichotomies do not correspond directly. As with all personality syndromes, maladaptive traits observed and their acuteness can vary with individual cases (Millon et al. 2004).

Several other personality models further define components of subclinical (less maladaptive) psychopathy and point toward where it might fit in lawful occupations. First is the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI), a self-report test of over 150 questions “designed to detect relatively mild levels of psychopathic traits in nonclinical and noncriminal samples” (Smith and Lilienfeld 2013, 208). Eight PPI subscales nest under three factors that together model the subclinical psychopathic personality. *Fearless Dominance* encompasses traits of Social Influence, Fearlessness, and Stress Immunity. *Self-Centered Impulsivity* enfolds Machiavellian Egocentricity, Rebellious Nonconformity, Blame Externalization, and Carefree Nonplanfulness. *Coldheartedness* is a standalone factor and subscale. Reflecting individual variation, similar overall PPI scores can result from differing subscale scores (e.g., one person may score high in Fearlessness but low in Coldheartedness, or vice versa) (Dutton 2012).

Second, a Triarchic model conceives psychopathy as overlapping dimensions of *Meanness*, *Disinhibition*, and *Boldness* (Patrick et al. 2009). Meanness encompasses “aggressive resource seeking without concern for others,” including callousness, exploitation, hostility and aggression, and physical cruelty (Wall et al. 2015, 96). Disinhibition – poor impulse control, distrustfulness, and aggression – brings irresponsible conduct. Boldness is what the word connotes: bravery and thrill-seeking, capacity to remain calm and focused under threat or pressure, fast recovery from stressful events, and social assurance.

Henning et al. (2014) say a “moderate degree” (145) of boldness, or what they also call fearless dominance, may be functional in the military, police, and fire services, or in corporate leadership. To these occupational areas, Smith and Lilienfeld (2013, 207) add military combat specifically, high contact sports, entertainment, and politics. Jakobwitz and Egan (2006) and Dutton (2012) speculate that some components of psychopathy may have become more adaptive in the wake of increasing competitiveness and materialism in contemporary western societies. Dutton identifies low anxiety, social dominance, and stress immunity in the PPI *Fearless Dominance* and *Coldheartedness* subscales as traits that may confer occupational advantage: charisma, focus, and persuasiveness (60); an “inner neural steel” (175); and a kind of “supersanity... that feeds on precision and clarity” (202). In effect, Dutton envisions a successful psychopath with a dash of James Bond, or as Jonason et al. (2010) might characterize the corporate psychopath: “extroverted, open, high on self-esteem, and low on conscientiousness and anxiety while being individualistic and competitive” (118–119).

Finally, Lilienfeld et al. (2015) integrate PPI and Triarchic elements in three prospective models of the successful psychopath. A *differential severity* model corresponds to mild clinical psychopathy. In a *moderated-expression* model, intact executive function, intelligence, or effective parenting curb aversive conduct. In a *differential-configuration* model, conscientiousness or boldness differentiate successful psychopaths. The authors anticipate a possible future model integrating *moderated-expression* and *differential-*

*configuration*, in which “protective factors...buffer [psychopathic] individuals against antisocial outcomes” (302).

### **Subclinical Psychopaths in Public Agencies**

Fennimore and Sementelli (2016) have recently applied psychopathy research to public administration. Drawing on Downs's (1967) theory of bureaucracy with its conceptualization of “mixed-motive,” versus self-interested managers, they theorize that subclinical psychopaths will be “Climbers,” who pursue self-interest over organizational interests, or “Zealots,” who exploit narrow organizational priorities to promote agentic ends. They speculate that public agencies could attract proportionally more psychopathic types than enter business because of “Ambiguity of goals, higher organizational politics, and an indirect relationship between employee performance and the [public agency's] success” (624).

Boddy (2011) similarly argues that “organizational politics can potentially play a bigger part in performance appraisals and promotions” (114) than in commercial organizations, and may make public agencies more vulnerable to manipulation by psychopathic personalities. In a survey of Australian managers, he found evidence that psychopaths clustered in two sectors of the national economy: financial services, with its opportunities for wealth and high social status; and “civil service” type organizations, by which he meant the public sector. In a recent article addressed to public agencies, Boddy (2016) argues that more psychopaths are gaining entry to leadership roles in many kinds of organizations as a result of “increasingly rapid turnover of senior managers and the associated speed with which they are replaced using ‘shallow’ recruitment processes” (254). More accommodating conditions in public agencies might be allowing psychopaths greater freedom for agentic (mis)behavior at less risk of exposure than in a corporate setting.

Fennimore and Sementelli (2016) theorize further that public agencies that valorize entrepreneurial techniques under public entrepreneurship, or NPM, could inadvertently attract or empower leaders with psychopathic traits who are disposed to pursue entrepreneurial “rule-breaking, risk-taking, power politics, and radical change” (Fennimore and Sementelli 2016, 617). Whether agentic behavior reflects zealotry or a climber's opportunism, public service values of equity, access, accountability, and transparency could be undermined.

### **Recent Evidence on Psychopathic Leaders**

The “wisdom” (Dutton 2012) of entrusting leadership to psychopaths remains an open research question. Expressing the majority view, Hare (1999) doubts it is ever prudent, calling subclinical psychopaths “subcriminal.” Boddy (2015) similarly writes, “claiming that ‘components’ of psychopathy may have positive leadership outcomes is very different to having actual psychopaths as leaders in politics or business delivering positive outcomes” (2424). But Smith and Lilienfeld (2013) argue that evidence is not entirely clear cut. They cite a meta-analysis of some 60 studies of Dark Triad personalities dating to the 1950s (O'Boyle et al. 2011) that concluded all three dark types were significantly related to counterproductive work behaviour, but statistical effect sizes varied, suggesting that workplace deviance could be overstated. M.E. Thomas (2013) proposes half-tongue in cheek that psychopaths are well suited for “dirty work” like “firing and downsizing” (13). More seriously, she cites a scholar who expresses concern that psychopathy diagnoses could be “moral judgments masquerading as medical explanation” (43). Speaking as a professed psychopath, she asserts that “the [psychopath] problem for our society is, how do we keep

[them] from acting in antisocial ways?” (39).

In a 2006 article, Boddy hypothesized risks posed by psychopathic business leaders. These include bankruptcies, fraudulent activities, and decisions of dubious legality; workplace bullying, employee firings and loss of expertise, and exploited or disheartened workers; lack of corporate social responsibility and environmental harm; and short-term decisions and disregarded investor interests – in effect, psychopaths as organizational destroyers, the subtitle of his 2011 book. In a 10-year update, Boddy (2015) reviewed empirical studies published after O’Boyle et al.’s 2012 article. Two studies whose co-authors include Babiak and Hare found a strong relationship between manipulation by psychopathic superiors and employee distress (Mathieu et al. 2012) and disillusionment (Mathieu et al. 2014). Sanecka (2013) reported lower levels of employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment under psychopathic superiors. Ray and Jones (2011) found a positive relationship between self-reported psychopathy of decision makers and leader inclination to engage in illegal toxic waste dumping. Two studies by Jones (2013, 2014) documented proclivity of psychopathic and other dark personality types to risk other peoples’ money for personal gain. Akahtar et al. (2013) found that primary psychopathy in entrepreneurs was negatively related to social entrepreneurship and desire to better human lives.

### **Psychopathy and the Dark Tetrad (II): The Dark Tetrad**

The prospect that more psychopaths are becoming leaders raises a question of whether other dark personalities might be as well, through agentic self-promotion, duplicity, or aggressiveness. Furnham et al. (2013) conclude on one hand that “high levels of Dark Triad traits, when combined with other factors (e.g., intelligence, physical attractiveness), may often help an individual acquire positions of leadership” (206). But they “typically derail somewhere down the line” (206) from inability to control behavior – however long derailment might take, and whatever mix of success and failure might go with it.

O’Boyle et al. (2012) cite evidence that narcissists appear the best suited of the Dark Triad to perform well as leaders in at least one type of setting: low-cooperation workplaces where sanctions against counterproductive work behavior are attenuated or weak. In practice, this seems likely to characterize a great many organizations, public and private. A study by Jonason et al. (2014) concluded that individuals high on psychopathy prefer work with limited interpersonal interaction and supervision. Those high on narcissism seek jobs that “facilitate social approval and admiration they hold so dear” (122). The Machiavellian tries to avoid jobs that “are unlikely to lead to status,” notably work involving caring for others.

Although the four dark types have distinct profiles and characteristics, they can be “indistinguishable within the normal range of personality” (Paulhus 2014, 422). Narcissists are typically grandiose, demand admiration, exaggerate achievements, and resent criticism or having to compromise. The Machiavellian is cold, calculating, and morally cynical, often a social chameleon who tries to manipulate others’ perceptions of mutual affinity (O’Boyle et al. 2012). Psychopaths are glib, impulsive, frequently charismatic impression-managers, as well as least anxious of the Dark Triad. Sadists are conspicuous for hurting others “for pure enjoyment” (Paulhus 2014, 421). While a qualified clinician should usually be able to tell the four apart (Goldman 2009a), given overlap in behaviours, typical employees may be hard put to do so with any accuracy.

In all four dark types, some degree of malevolence is often seen (Paulhus 2014), while psychopaths, narcissists, and Machiavellians all have been found to admit “prejudice against immigrants” (Furnham et al. 2013, 207). Babiak and Hare (2006) call psychopaths “meanest” of the Dark Triad, but they observe that when sense of entitlement and lack of empathy in a

narcissist cause antisocial behavior, the pattern amounts to an aggressive or malignant narcissism that can be hard for the lay observer to tell from psychopathy (see Glad 2002; Meloy 1988). While a Machiavellian can be as malevolent as a psychopath, they tend to be more self-controlled, unless they become “ego-depleted.” In that case, a Machiavellian may act out like a psychopath (Furnham et al. 2013, 208). In a study of employee perceptions of Dark Triad traits, Rauthmann and Kolar (2012) found that subordinates viewed narcissistic leaders more benignly than Machiavellians and psychopaths. Narcissism came off as a more attractive, seemingly conscientious personality of its own type, while psychopaths and Machiavellians were seen as a similar, objectionable pairing that was hard to distinguish.

Detecting dark leaders in an organization may be both aided and confused by ongoing expert debate about how to conceive them. Traditionally, personality disorder was seen as distinct from normal behavior, a “categorical” perspective that is embodied in the *DSM* (Board and Fritzon 2003). A newer “dimensional” view, which sees disorder as a continuum of extreme forms of normal behavior, has helped to conceptualize a subclinical Dark Tetrad. But yet another theoretical question asks whether the Tetrad’s elements are discrete types, or manifestations of an underlying form – a “uniqueness” versus a “unification” view (Rauthmann and Kolar 2012). Although the uniqueness view is dominant (Furnham et al. 2013; O’Boyle et al. 2012), recently Marcus and Ziegler-Hill (2015) have argued that dark traits might best be conceived as a “big tent” in which “traits qualify as dark if they are associated with problematic outcomes across a variety of situations even when they are only present at modest levels” (435). They suggest adding *spitefulness*, *greed*, *interpersonal dependency*, and *perfectionism* to a constellation of traits including *boldness*, *meanness*, and *disinhibition* from the Psychopathic Personality Index.

Under any of these perspectives, similar agentic behavior among dark personality types implies a potential rate of incidence in organizational leadership that extends beyond just psychopaths. Determining its scale is complicated by the reality that, like psychopaths in Cleckley’s (1982) “Material,” other dark leaders can be expected to try to mask their identity with a persona of psychological normality that conceals agentic intent from the organization (O’Boyle et al. 2012).

### **Organizational Responses**

Growing awareness of personality disturbance in some portion of leaders has prompted increasing study. Goldman (2009a), an action researcher in executive consulting, writes about the “unintentionally toxic behavior of otherwise accomplished and successful leaders acting out of psychological turbulence and driven by obsessions, phobias and narcissism, [and] personality disorders” (28). He cautions against victimizing leaders – including narcissistic and antisocial personalities – especially when they are embedded in toxic environments. He urges use of psychotherapists to help leaders regain health and function to retain their talent for an organization, and to assure ADA-compliance in dealing with them.

Other authors we cite make various recommendations to reduce exposure to toxic leader destructiveness. At the broadest level, Lipman-Bluman (2005b) urges organizations to institute 360-degree review procedures to involve a variety of incumbent managers in selecting or assessing leaders; establish periodic public accountability forums that require leaders to explain and justify their policies and decisions; and provide respectable exit options to allow problem leaders to save face in leaving.

Operationally, Kets de Vries (2012) outlines steps to strengthen rules and norms for cooperative social exchange that can circumscribe opportunity for manipulative behavior

(O'Boyle et al. 2012). At the top, governing boards and executives need to model expected leader conduct by defining standards, ensuring they have teeth, and visibly punishing violations. Robust team structures and team leadership can provide some immunity against divide-and-conquer tactics. Meaningful performance indicators can make it harder to evade accountability by lying, blaming, or spreading disinformation. Warning flags about behavior – discrepancies in how subordinates, superiors, or peers view a leader; good people leaving; mounting Human Resources complaints – should not be dismissed, but investigated. Exit interviews should be designed to expose abuse as a cause of lost talent and to reveal situations unsuspected by superiors. Organizational culture should encourage reporting abusive or unethical leadership, supported by anti-bullying policies, whistleblower protections, ombuds offices, or anonymous tip lines. In-service training can educate employees to tell manipulative tactics and impression-management from prosocial leadership.

Goldman (2009b) advises that leaders receive *DSM* training so that they can better distinguish low from high-toxicity situations involving psychopathologies. Citing Frost (2003) on “toxin detectors” and “toxin handlers,” he advocates establishing detector/handler functions to identify toxic situations and counsel how to address them. Goldman conceives these roles for key managers and human resources leaders, but also says that informal toxin detectors who wave warning flags – like the managers in our opening case – should not be ignored.

If public agencies do nothing else, they should institute or sustain rigorous selection methods to reduce vulnerability to deception by dark leader candidates. Babiak and Hare (2006) emphasize need to review résumés thoroughly, verify all stated facts in reference and background checks, and ensure that interviewers are well qualified. For senior positions, executive recruiters experienced in screening for personality traits could be used to flag suspect candidates. Succession planning and internal management development would allow agencies able to invest in it to groom leaders internally under close, intensive, long-term scrutiny. Babiak and Hare also warn that a psychopath might be able to “hijack” executive recruiting or succession planning. Thus, organizations should utilize them with due care.

Goldman (2009b) – who cautions that “shallow” use of 360-degree review, executive recruiters, performance measurement, or succession planning can foster misplaced confidence in their reliability – recommends *DSM*-based screening of leadership candidates if performed by qualified experts. Boddy (2016) explicitly calls for public agencies to adopt psychopathy testing for candidate self-reports, subordinate psychopathy assessments in leader promotions, and brain scanning in contested cases. He warns that “untrained (in psychopathy) personnel directors and managers who interview and review psychopaths in the workplace are easily duped by charm, likeableness and apparent sincerity” (262). Fennimore and Sementelli (2016) emphasize rigorous selection procedures, combined with high levels of transparency and accountability, to limit activities of subclinical psychopaths – and by extension, other dark personalities – in public agencies.

### **Discussion and a Conclusion: Servant Leadership as Screening Strategy**

It might appear that Dark Tetrad personalities are the apex of toxic and destructive leaders, with psychopaths arguably the tip of the pyramid. While not unsympathetic, we suspect it is premature to draw this conclusion absent greater knowledge about possible moderating effects of variables like degree of personality affliction in a leader or level of toxicity in a workplace. As an example, psychopathology in a borderline or histrionic personality in a high-toxicity environment, described by Goldman (2009a) in two cases, could exceed disruption posed by a subclinical dark personality in a high-functioning

workplace, though we appreciate that such a setting could begin to become toxic fairly quickly. For now, it seems prudent not to propose a “most toxic” leader type.

Having said that, the four Dark Tetrad leader types pose a concern for public agencies for several reasons. First, if more subclinical psychopathic personalities truly are becoming high-level leaders through selection and promotion processes that advance them more casually than in the past, it follows that other dark types could be doing so as well through similar agentic disposition to manipulate patrons and discredit opposition. In turn, if comparatively more psychopaths in fact are in the public sector than in business as an effect of human resources and promotion processes that are more amenable to manipulation and self-concealment than in private industry (Boddy 2011; Fennimore and Sementelli 2016), higher proportions of the other Dark Tetrad types could be in public agencies as well. At this point, baseline research is needed to estimate the incidence of all Dark Tetrad types in public agencies to better establish just how concerned stakeholders should be.

Second, while a trained clinician may be able to distinguish among disordered personality types (Goldman 2009a), the typical public agency today will lack such capability. In practice, if or when lay coworkers (including public employees) call a manipulative or abusive leader a “corporate psychopath,” they often are likely to be using it as a catchall for what could be any one of the Dark Tetrad. The Dekazens character in our opening case hints at all four dark types, from psychopathic charm to sadistic cruelty (what leader ordinarily relishes firing people?). The practical organizational need is less to confirm a dark leader type clinically than it is for decision makers to respond effectively to a potentially malevolent personality of whatever kind it may be. In an ideal scenario, functioning toxin detectors will be in place to identify toxic individuals or situations. Unofficial detection also will be heeded, as depicted in our fictional scenario. Psychiatrically-sensitized leaders will be prepared to act on what is communicated to them and to execute a commensurate organizational response, be it leadership counseling, psychotherapy, easing a leader out by consent or by marginalizing them, or termination, if warranted. Patrons of a possible dark leader hopefully will recognize that their objectivity could be compromised by their personal involvement. Accountable public leaders should also be alert to the reality that toxic workplaces and toxic leaders are often correlates. Workplace toxicity is likely to need abating if a succeeding leader is to achieve future success.

Finally, to the hypothesis that subclinical psychopaths could lead in ways that endanger traditional public service values (Fennimore and Sementelli 2016), we add two nuances. Following from our discussion of Dark Tetrad personalities in public agencies, we would maintain that such a threat is posed by all four dark types, ultimately because of similar agentic behavior. Fennimore and Sementelli (2016) recognize the need to widen analysis beyond psychopaths to consider larger implications of other dark leader types in the public sector. In this article, we have sought to extend their work in the hope that further study will be encouraged.

To concerns that psychopathic leaders could threaten equality, accountability, democratic process, or social justice in public services (Fennimore and Sementelli 2016), we would add a potential threat from all dark leaders to rights and inclusion of immigrants and minorities, among both constituents and public workers. Prejudice of dark personalities toward immigrants (Furnham et al. 2013) could sometimes (or often?) be extended to the larger minority groups from which they may come. Prejudiced leader conduct could arise from psychological malice in a Dark Tetrad Climber – hinted at in our Dekazens character – or out of a Zealot’s agentic effort to exploit political change and opportunity. Abuse of

immigrant and minority groups also should be a concern of research on public dark leaders.

### Servant Leadership

As indicated previously, there are tests for psychopathy, the Dark Tetrad personalities, and other forms of personality disturbance (Fennimore and Sementelli 2016; Goldman 2009b; Paulhus 2014). As yet though, personality screening is not widely used in leader selection and promotion processes (Kets de Vries 2012). Until that happens – or if it never does – servant leadership might offer public agencies a protocol for culling out toxic, destructive, or dark leader prospects by increasing capability to identify constructive leaders, ones who are pro-organization and pro-employee, as conceived in the destructive leader model. In Boddy's (2016) words, "recruiting for people who demonstrably do care for and value others would achieve the same objective [as psychopathy screening] in eliminating psychopaths from the selection process" (266). Increasing an overall rate of constructive leadership might also translate into greater trust in government (Kloby 2012).

As the term *servant* infers, the servant leader invests his or her personal ambition in prosocial agency, service, and stewardship. Originator Robert Greenleaf (1977) wrote, "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (13). Writing in the late 1960s, Greenleaf asserted that public and private organizations faced a "wide disparity between the quality of society [that people] know is reasonable and possible with available resources, and, on the other hand, the actual performance of the whole range of institutions that exist to serve society" (9). Greenleaf conceived servant leadership as a philosophy that, developed and enacted as a scientifically testable strategy, could transform institutional environments by eliciting and empowering a different kind of leader, follower expectations and behaviour, and organizational performance (Liden et al. 2015). He wrote, "Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants" (10).

Over the past 40 years, servant leadership has become a subject in business and management research and education (Hayes 2008) and, to a lesser degree, in public administration (Weinstein 2013; Hanson 2011; Parris and Peachey 2013). In a major literature review, Van Dierendonck (2011) says that, in contrast with concepts such as Burns's (1978) transformational leadership which champions humanistic leadership practices to elicit organizational performance (Graham 1991), servant leadership seeks this by satisfying concerns of followers. Servant leaders create "conditions that enhance followers' well-being and functioning and thereby facilitate the realization of a shared vision; servant leaders trust followers to do what is necessary for the organization" (1235). Writing about public organization, Weinstein (2013) states that the servant leader places "ultimate value on the human component...and seeks to improve the lives of the employees, without any other motive" (87).

These premises have yet to be proven in practice (de Waal and Sirvo 2012), but toward that end, tests of servant leader traits to screen and select leaders are being developed. Liden et al. (2008) created a 28-item servant leadership personality scale (the SL-28) to measure seven dimensions identified in the servant leadership literature: *emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically*. In an initial workplace application, the SL-28 and a reduced 7-item global scale (the SL-7) showed strong validity and empirical evidence of positive relations between ascribed servant leadership and

“follower in-role job performance, creativity, helping, and OCB [Organizational Citizenship Behavior]” (Liden et al. 2015, 257). In the figure below, we compare a selection of items from the SL-28 that are correlated with the seven servant leader dimensions, and the “Dirty Dozen” 12-question, self-report Dark Triad scale (Jonason and Webster 2010).

**Servant Leader Traits Compared to “Dirty Dozen” (Dark Triad)**

Servant Leader (SL-28)	Dark Triad
My manager: 1. Cares about my personal well-being. 2. Is always interested in helping people in our community. 3. Is able to effectively think through complex problems. 4. Has a thorough understanding of our organization and its goals. 5. Makes my career development a priority. 6. Seems to care more about my success than his/her own. 7. Holds high ethical standards. 8. Is always honest. 9. Would not compromise ethical principles in order to succeed. 10. Values honesty more than profits.	I: 1. Tend to manipulate others to get my way. 2. Have used deceit or lied to get my way. 3. Have used flattery to get my way. 4. Tend to exploit others towards my own end. 5. Tend to lack remorse. 6. Tend to not be too concerned with morality or the morality of my actions. 7. Tend to be callous or insensitive. 8. Tend to be cynical. 9. Tend to want others to admire me. 10. Tend to want others to pay attention to me. 11. Tend to seek prestige or status. 12. Tend to expect special favors from others.

Based on the two sets of scale items, a servant leader personality would seem to be a near opposite of a dark personality with its agentic life strategy. In theory, adopting servant leader criteria in public agency selection strategies should reduce odds that dark, toxic, or destructive personalities become candidates for leadership roles. Pioneering public organizations might begin by developing in-house screening or evaluation protocols based on the servant leadership literature, perhaps adopting an academic personality scale as one becomes available. Successful demonstration projects could stimulate emulation and widening adoption by other public agencies. If and as servant leader criteria came into widespread use, trend analysis should eventually be able to document whether they bring desired changes in characteristics of leaders, in employee fulfilment and organizational performance, and trust in public institutions.

In contemplating this scenario, a potential concern would seem to be the prospect of Dark Tetrad personalities mimicking servant leader traits to compete for positions. At some point, collaboration between researchers in servant leadership and dark personalities could be useful to help public agencies learn how to tell a “real” servant leader from an agentic imposter “continually shaping [his or her] self-presentation” (Thomas 2013, 208).

For now, practitioners and researchers should recognize that, yes, dark personalities constitute some portion of executives, managers, and supervisors in public agencies, just as they do of corporate leadership. Public decision makers who select other public leaders will

benefit from learning more than they probably know now about what to expect from a Dark Tetrad personality. Public administration researchers can contribute by working to map how common they may be in public agencies, and to help devise rules and procedures for employing them where suitable while curbing their toxic, destructive potential.

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