

Dark Leadership International: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper explores the literature on the topic of dark leadership, moving from a western understanding of dark leadership to explore the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The initial articles are selected to provide a definition for dark leadership before latter articles frame a discussion of the related factors of charisma, ethics and narcissism. The final section of the literature review itself brings in articles to discuss the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures as these differences apply to behavioral norms for leaders. Cullen, Gentry, and Yammarino (2015) approach the topic of destructive leadership in a cultural context from the perspective of the leaders, using derailment as a basis for discussing behavioral norms. Li (2019) studies collectivistic and individualistic cultures from the perspective of the employee, using personal autonomy as the key factor. Mercado and Trumball (2018) take a practical look at immigrant California schoolteachers from collectivistic cultures who face conflict when interacting with an individualistic school system. The paper concluded by proposing that Servant-Leadership Theory might create inroads into an otherwise nebulous topic.

Keywords: dark leadership, destructive leadership, toxic leadership, eastern culture, western culture, collectivist culture

Introduction

In a recent article that appeared in the *New Yorker*, Alex Ross (2018) explored the never-ending fascination with fascism, in particular, the fascination with Adolf Hitler. He states, “The Holocaust is the greatest crime in history, one that people remain desperate to understand. Germany's plunge from the heights of civilization to the depths of barbarism is an everlasting shock” (p. 66). The Nazi regime has become a lasting train wreck. It demands a glance, and once glanced upon, mesmerizes many who view it. Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, Germany rose from ruin to rule in Europe, but all too quickly back to ruin. In the decades since, Hitler has become an icon of the topic that will be considered in this literature review: dark leadership.

Findings

The Definition of Dark Leadership

The logical beginning place for this review is a definition of terms. Thoroughgood, Sawyer, Padilla, and Lunsford (2018) discuss the fascination that has developed with the dark side of leadership; they prefer the term “destructive leadership” as overarching expression to describe the various behaviors of leaders with harmful consequences for organizations and followers (627). They too note the effects of Adolph Hitler’s leadership. It ultimately led to widespread poverty in Germany (627). This definition takes a pragmatic approach, viewing the outcomes as the defining element.

Winn and Dykes (2019) use the term “toxic” to describe leaders who create a hostile workplace (p. 38). In their study, they barrow from the United States military, using studies in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which they apply to the workplace (p. 39). Their article is intended primarily for upper management, encouraging the highest level of leaders to identify

and rectify the problem of toxic leadership in their organizations. Failure to do so results in a loss of productivity, a loss of profits, and a dangerous increase in the stress level of many employees (p. 38). The concept of dark leadership is now being discussed, not just theoretically, but practically, given the implications it has on an organization.

As noted, scholars acknowledge that destructive leadership does describe more than one behavior or construct. Schmid, Pircher, and Peus (2018) delve into the specific effects different types of destructive leadership tend to have. They present four categories: 1) Exploitative leadership, 2) Abusive supervision, 3) Organization-directed destructive leadership, and 4) Sabotage or Vandalism (p 3). They performed a study, omitting the fourth category, to determine the effects the first three types of destructive leadership would have on employee retention. All three types were found to increase employee intention to leave with exploitative and abusive having a stronger effect than organizational-directed (p. 11). Leaders who engage in exploitative and abusive behavior tend to have a negative effect on their employees with negative influence on organizational retention and profitability.

The Power of Charisma

Winn and Dykes (2019) noted that destructive leadership does not exist in a vacuum. They describe a toxic triangle including three items: 1) Destructive leaders, 2) Susceptible followers, and 3) Conducive environments (p. 40). Ironically, the first item on the list of characteristics of destructive leaders is charisma (p.40). Traditionally considered a valuable resource, charisma has become suspect in the study of destructive leaders.

Writing with specific emphasis on leadership in the medical and scientific arenas, Shooraj (2016) discusses the significance of charisma, promoting charismatic leadership as force

of change and innovation (p. 41). Using an empirical study based on 348 questionnaires at an Iranian public hospital, Shooraj (2016) concluded that charismatic leadership had a positive impact on self-leadership and work engagement (p. 41). Many studies approach charisma as a positive force in leadership, encouraging the growth and development of charisma as an effective tool to be utilized.

Shao, Feng, and Wang, (2017) discuss the history of charismatic leadership. The word *charisma* comes from the Ancient Greek word meaning “gift” (p. 195). Charismatic leaders establish a relationship between themselves and their followers, resulting in an especially strong admiration and respect for the leader and an “internalized commitment” to the leader’s vision (p. 195). Charisma is an effective tool for motivating followers. What becomes somewhat alarming is the level of admiration that followers develop. Followers who have developed an internalized commitment to a leader may accept direction when doing so is not in their own best interests or in the best interests of their organizations.

Vergauwe, Wille, Hofmans, Kaiser, and De Fruyt (2018) analyzed charisma in more specific contexts. They examined interpersonal leadership behavior and organizational leader behavior and the role of charisma. They hypothesized that very low or very high levels of charisma would have a negative effect, while a moderate level of charisma would be beneficial. Their studies supported the curvilinear effects of charisma on the perception of leader effectiveness (p. 119).

The Question of Ethics

While charisma is generally viewed as a positive characteristic in leaders, the overwhelming effect it can have on followers becomes problematic. Winn and Dykes (2019)

state that Millennials tend to be altruistic and idealistic, making them more likely to buy into ethical relativism (p. 40). When leaders do not act in the best interests of their followers or their organizations, followers who have been influenced by charismatic leaders may accept toxic situations as a result.

Takala and Auvinen (2016) return to the example of the career of Adolf Hitler. They study the power of storytelling. They write, “The storyteller aspires to influence the social reality with a view to shaping it in a desirable direction. This, in fact, addresses the ethical dimension in leadership stories: Storytelling may involve attempts to seduce or even manipulate with evil purposes” (p. 22). Charismatic leaders like Hitler present a story. That story may be a lie, but for those who internalize it, that story becomes the follower’s reality. This reality results in unethical beliefs and behaviors becoming acceptable norms by those who have been predisposed by the story.

Unethical behavior on the part of leaders also tends to have an influence on the followers. Asnakew and Mekonnen (2019) define unethical leadership as “dishonesty and unfairness, engagement in corruption and other criminal behaviors, low empathy, lack of responsibility, following egocentric pursuit of own interest, and manipulation and misuse of others” (p. 165). When leaders act unethically, Asnakew and Mekonnen (2019) argue that deviant behaviors on the part of their followers are further enabled (p. 166). A lack of ethical grounding may have significant consequences through an organization.

Liao, Yam, Johnson, Wu, and Song (2018) reverse the model, electing to study the topic of abusive leadership from the perpetrator-centric perspective instead of the victim-centric perspective (p. 1040). They present moral attentiveness and moral courage as moderating effects that lead to more constructive leadership behavior (p. 1040). In short, leaders with a higher level

of moral attentiveness feel guilty when they act abusively, and those leaders with a higher level of moral courage are more willing to admit to abusive behaviors instead of attempting to justify, defend or overlook their actions (Liao, Yam, Johnson, Wu, & Song, 2018, p. 1043). The idea that moral people will act morally is something of an obvious conclusion. This conclusion does not address the issue of destructive leaders who lack a positive moral center.

The Problem of Narcissism

One factor that has been studied in the context of destructive leadership is narcissism. Brender-Ilan and Sheaffer (2018) define it as “a preoccupation with grandiose fantasies of self-importance, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, which appears by early adulthood and manifests in a variety of settings” (p. 4). Along with Machiavellianism and psychopathy, they link narcissism to destructive outpouring and aggressive behaviors with detrimental effects on employee emotions (p. 4).

To counteract abusive behavior by leaders, significant research has been dedicated to the topic of emotional intelligence. Garcia, Lopez-Perez, Cruzado, Carrascoso, and Fernandez (2017) performed a study to evaluate the effect of an Intensive Program of Emotional Intelligence (IPEI) on middle managers. They found that training in emotional competencies led to greater personal satisfaction, task performance and a better work environment (p. 512). Abusive leaders, given to narcissistic tendencies, lack emotional intelligence.

Abdullah (2017) gives several definitions for emotional intelligence. In simple terms, it is “the capacity to recognize inner self feelings and those of others’ and use it in motivating ourselves and managing emotions in ourselves and with others” (p. 2). More complex definitions identify multiple factors that are dependent upon one another that make up emotional

intelligence. Using surveys from 470 respondents, Abdulla (2017) studied the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management style (p. 4). Respondents with high emotional intelligence were more likely to choose compromising as way of managing conflict (p. 8).

International Implications

If ethical considerations provide a foundation to address dark leadership, then the consideration of culture must also have an impact. Vater, Moritz, and Roepke (2018) state that narcissism is increasing in Western societies (p. 2). They discuss the use of the singular 1st person pronoun (I, Me) in place of the plural 1st person (We, Us) as well as changes in song lyrics and stronger orientation toward fame in TV shows as signs that narcissism has become an epidemic in Western societies (p. 2). They use the reunification of Germany as a basis for study. West Germany, under a capitalist system, developed a more individualistic culture, while East Germany developed a more collectivistic culture (p. 4). They recruited 1,025 individuals from Germany by offering a free e-book for participation in an online study (p. 5). They found that individuals from West Germany scored higher on narcissistic grandiosity (p. 7).

Much research has been conducted on the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Cullen, Gentry, and Yammarino (2015) examined self-perception tendencies and the perception to derail in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Derailment is defined as one of three things: 1) prematurely reaching a career plateau, 2) being demoted, or 3) being fired (p. 162). Previous research identified personality flaws as an important factor in derailment with more emphasis on a leader having “the wrong stuff” than failing to have “the right stuff” (p. 163). Personality flaws include a leader’s lack of self-

awareness or failing to understand how others perceive the leader (p. 164). Four possible patterns of self-other agreement (SOA) are presented: 1) in-agreement and high, 2) in-agreement and low, 3) overrating or self-enhancement, and 4) underrating or self-diminishment (p. 164).

The authors turn next to societal culture as an important context that determines the appropriateness of different qualities (p. 168). They state, “Members of similar communities, societies, and organizations share similar models of effective leaders, and these models have been connected to the endorsed values, norms, and beliefs of these groups” (p. 169). Specific leadership behaviors may be acceptable in one culture but considered dark in another.

In order to study the likelihood of derailment in individualistic vs collectivistic cultures, they used archival data from the GLOBE study (p. 172). They concluded that overrating in collectivistic cultures led to a higher chance of derailment than overrating in individualistic culture (p. 188). They concluded that underrating did not lead to an increased chance of derailment in an individualistic culture, with evidence that underrating in an individualistic culture may actually be of some benefit (p. 188). Conversely, in collectivistic cultures, underrating led to a higher chance of derailment as substantial levels of self-diminishment appear to be interpreted not as modesty or humility but as self-doubt (p. 188).

In assessing their research, Cullen, Gentry, and Yammarino (2015) note that their finding that overrating is not necessarily detrimental in individualistic cultures (p. 190) is supported by some previous research but not by all. They suggest that “true self-confidence may lead to overrating as an expression of ‘bright’ personality; however, overrating due to the grandiose, self-promoting tendencies of narcissists is an expression of ‘dark’ personality (p. 190). This conclusion requires deep analysis of an individual leader to separate true self-confidence from pervasive narcissism. They state, “Current classifications of dark personality do not adequately

capture the ‘dark’ side of seemingly ‘bright’ personality traits” (p. 191). It seems clear ‘dark’ and ‘bright’ are defined at least in part within a cultural context and that certain leadership behaviors which would be considered dark leadership traits in a collectivistic culture are considered acceptable norms in an individualistic culture. Cullen, Gentry, and Yammarino (2015) support this conclusion, stating, “Thus, to prevent detrimental outcomes, managers must curb self-serving or boasting expressions in these (collectivistic) cultures” (p. 190).

A related study by Li (2019) examines collectivistic versus individualistic cultures from the perspective of the employee, looking specifically at the relationship between job autonomy on the effect of depression among workers (p. 181). Two separate studies were conducted. The first studied full-time employees in China, a collectivistic culture. The second study compared full-time employees in India, a collectivistic culture, with full-time employees in the United States, an individualistic culture. Both studies found that an increase in job autonomy led to a decrease in workplace depression, but the second study noted that in India, the collectivistic culture, the attenuating effect was stronger than in the United States, the individualistic culture (p. 187). This conclusion supports the argument that different expectations, based on cultural norms, lead to different outcomes, at least on a marginal level.

An article in the *International Journal of Psychology*, by Mercado and Trumball (2018) acknowledges the differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures, discussing a study conducted in California schools. New immigrant teachers, particularly those who come from collectivistic cultures, experience cross-cultural conflict because they have different perceptions of the roles of parents, teachers, and students regarding role hierarchy and authority (p. 44). Twelve teachers from Asia and Latin America, collectivistic cultures, were interviewed by experienced mentor specialists to address cross-cultural conflicts (p. 46). The issue of

cultural expectations remains the same whether viewed top-down, from the perspective of the leader, or bottom-up, from the perspective of the followers. The expectations for collectivistic vs individualistic cultures vary, resulting in potential conflicts over what is and is not an acceptable norm.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The study of dark leadership is problematic as a definition of dark requires the acceptance of a standard. During my undergraduate work at the University of South Florida, I took a course titled Ethics. The instructor of the course was a PhD professor with a graduate assistant who occasionally gave lectures. On one such occasion, she lectured on the relationship between society and ethics, making comments that suggested ethics were defined by society. A student interrupted, asking “What about Nazi Germany?” She enthusiastically said that was great example of a situation in which a society determined to act in way that not ethical. The student persisted, saying, “If the German society of that time determined that the extermination of Jews and other undesirables was the ethical thing to do, then who are we to say that it was wrong?” The graduate assistant was completely dumbstruck having no idea how to answer that question. She deferred to the PhD professor, who was sitting at his desk in the front-right corner of the classroom. Without standing, he said that the question on the table could not be answered simply in the time of a single class. He said that he hoped that the entire course would provide an answer. As the course unfolded, it was revealed that he was a follower of the Joseph Fletcher situation ethics approach to morality. Religion, per Peter L. Berger, was the sacred canopy produced by society to answer life’s mysteries. Why the extermination of six million Jewish men, women and children by the Nazi regime was unethical the class never answered.

Many studies in dark leadership are purely pragmatic in their approach. Dark leadership should not be allowed within an organization because it will lead to heightened stress in employees. Heightened stress will lead to reduced productivity and higher turnover. These factors will result in diminished profitability. Upper management is being told to moderate destructive leadership behaviors because if they don't, it will cost them on the bottom line. The argument is still founded on the bottom line.

Bringing international and cultural factors into focus just further muddies the water. Because individualistic cultures, including the United States, tend to expect a certain level of narcissism from effective leaders, destructive leadership behaviors are more likely to be accepted. The very concepts of 'bright' versus 'dark' personality traits is blurred into obscurity because the focus is on outcomes, not inputs.

Pragmatically speaking, the approach that seems most promising to address problems of destructive leadership behaviors is the advocacy of servant-leadership theory. As the approach has gained in popularity, some theorists have argued that the principles behind the theory predate Christianity (Gandolf, Stone, & Deno, 2017, p. 351). Nevertheless, the theory is founded on sound, ethical principles which provide a solid foundation for addressing moral issues. Most of the theories of leadership seem to be built upon the sand. When the storms roll in, they lack the foundation to endure.

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