| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Power, the Dark Triad, and the Organisational Tragedy of the Commons: Knowledge Retention as an Instrument of Domination

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| **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the exercise of power within organisational settings, with emphasis on dysfunctional behaviours associated with the Dark Triad — Machiavellianism, narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy — and on the deliberate retention of knowledge as a strategy of symbolic domination. It is based on the understanding that pursuing power is a legitimate human inclination, but one that, in competitive organisational contexts, can take on manipulative and harmful forms. The study draws on political philosophy and organisational psychology contributions to analyse practices such as the selective favouring of allies, the manipulation of success trajectories, and the restriction of access to knowledge as a means of self-preservation and status maintenance. It also considers the influence of Brazilian cultural elements — marked by centralised leadership styles and low levels of cooperation — which contribute to the reproduction of permissive environments that enable opportunistic profiles to thrive. The study further highlights a gap in the main strands of management theory, which, by prioritising material incentives and formal structures, tend to overlook the effects of symbolic power relations and interpersonal manipulation on organisational performance. It is argued that the absence of precise institutional mechanisms to address such behaviours reflects a lack of theoretical recognition of the problem. The article concludes that understanding knowledge retention as an instrument of domination requires a broader perspective on power dynamics and the incorporation of interdisciplinary approaches that combine ethics, organisational culture, and individual behaviour. Further empirical investigation is recommended, particularly with support from organisational psychology.

| **KEYWORDS**

Organisational power; Dark Triad; Knowledge retention; Tragedy of the commons; Pursuit of power.

1. Introduction

This theoretical-analytical essay is based on literature from management, economics, organisational psychology, and political philosophy, articulating these fields with observations on recurring patterns of power struggle within organisations. The approach is critical, emphasising the intersection of political philosophy, organisational psychology, administrative theory, and institutional economics. No empirical instruments were employed, nor were data collection or analysis methodologies adopted, as the primary aim is to discuss, in light of various theoretical frameworks, how superiors in the workplace exercise power. Particular emphasis is placed on the harmful manifestations of such power, especially knowledge retention, which is considered in this study to be the most visible form of symbolic manipulation.

The persistence of this practice highlights the limitations of traditional administrative theories, which tend to overlook the deliberate retention of knowledge as a means of maintaining institutional power. Management theory has focused on identifying ways to motivate workers and to improve both interpersonal relations among employees and their interactions with the organisation, as noted by Nunes (2024). Although organisational psychology has made progress in describing behavioural traits associated with such conduct — as in Jonason and Webster (2010), who developed a concise measure for the Dark Triad —

empirical studies examining its organisational effects remain limited. Given its relevance for understanding the mechanisms that affect both employee performance and well-being, this phenomenon warrants further investigation, including with support from the organisational psychology literature.

This essay has argued that knowledge retention constitutes one of the most visible manifestations of power strategies underpinned by traits associated with the Dark Triad. It is a recurring practice in competitive and hierarchical environments where civil servants occupying different managerial positions may restrict access to information to remain indispensable, hinder colleagues' advancement, and reinforce their authority.

The tragedy of the commons provides a useful lens for interpreting how individualistic behaviour within institutional settings can produce collective harm. In organisational contexts, individuals who exhibit traits associated with the Dark Triad may compromise the work environment, reduce productivity, and ultimately undermine institutional outcomes — a dynamic consistent with the logic described by Hardin (1968). According to this theory, collective resources deteriorate when individuals, acting rationally in their own self-interest, overuse or restrict access to shared assets, even when such behaviour threatens the sustainability of the system itself.

In organisational contexts, technical knowledge, information networks, and promotion criteria are collective assets tied to institutional goals. However, individuals in positions of power who strategically withhold knowledge or manipulate the distribution of opportunities based on personal interests treat such resources as though they were private property. This symbolic appropriation mirrors the logic of the "private use of a public good" described by Hardin. Conversely, scholars such as Ostrom (1990) have demonstrated that it is possible to prevent the tragedy of the commons through the creation of shared rules and institutional mechanisms of regulation and cooperation — underscoring the importance of organisational structures that inhibit individual domination and promote the responsible collective use of symbolic resources.

This dynamic is sustained, in part, by a widely held belief in common sense that promotions result solely from individual merit and that those in higher hierarchical positions have reached them through personal effort. Challenges to such trajectories are often dismissed as expressions of resentment or envy on the part of those who have not advanced professionally.

Based on the cases reported, this article aims to discuss how power is sought, exercised, and manipulated within organisations, analysing the effects of such conduct on productivity. To this end, it draws on authors such as Rollo May, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Adam Smith to shed light on power's ethical and existential dimensions, articulating these contributions with empirical findings from organisational psychology, management, and economics. The intention is to highlight the limitations of traditional theoretical models when faced with the complexity of human behaviour in the workplace. The following section deepens the conceptual analysis of the pursuit of power as a fundamental human phenomenon, establishing the theoretical framework that will underpin the subsequent sections.

2. Power dynamics in organisational settings: between legitimacy and manipulation

The pursuit of power is inherent to human beings and is not, in itself, problematic. It is a natural inclination, linked to the capacity to effect change and to assume responsibility, as noted by May (1982). Hobbes (2003) reinforces this notion by stating that the desire for power is continuous and driven by self-preservation. For Hobbes, human beings act out of a motive of self-preservation and self-interest. This conception is made explicit in the following passage from *Leviathan*:
The right of nature [...] is the liberty each man has to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature — that is to say, of his own life — and consequently, of doing anything which, in his own judgement and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.(Hobbes, 2003, p. 108).

Smith's (2009) finding — that humans are driven by self-interest and the pursuit of maximising gains — aligns with May's reflections. Nietzsche (1999), in turn, shows that even within the will to obey, a desire to dominate may lie. It is essential to distinguish between the pursuit of power — a legitimate aspect of human behaviour — and the ways in which that power is exercised. Problems emerge when it manifests through manipulation, authoritarianism, or disregard for others. In such cases, the desire for power reflects not only an urge to dominate but also a search for recognition and respect.

The way in which power is exercised makes a significant difference in organisational settings, influencing outcomes that may range from improved performance to institutional decline. Rollo May (1982) distinguishes between different manifestations of power, emphasising that not all involve domination. In corporate contexts, for example, power can take on productive and creative forms, such as the power of the explorer — associated with innovation and cooperation — without necessarily implying the subjugation of others. This positive conception of power, grounded in collaboration, is particularly relevant for understanding how interpersonal relationships impact productivity and organisational climate.

Although power can manifest constructively within organisations, concern arises when it is expressed through unethical behaviours aimed at gaining prestige and hierarchical advancement through unfair competition. In professional environments, individuals often seek recognition and promotion, expressing a need for influence and visibility within the organisational structure — even at an ethical cost. Such actions may be driven, for instance, by the belief — real or imagined — that it is necessary to sideline colleagues who threaten one's position to secure permanence or advancement within the company. This view is supported by Zweifel and Zaborowski (1996), who argue that employees act primarily in their own self-interest. Shapiro and Willig (1990) likewise contend that leaders do not continuously pursue the organisation's objectives but rather their own personal interests.

A relevant issue is that abusive behaviour by supervisors towards subordinates — as pointed out by Laurijssen et al. (2016) — despite its evident unfairness, tends to be tolerated or silenced by other employees. In many cases, such omission is related to the fear of also becoming retaliation targets. It should be noted that those in higher hierarchical positions hold more significant control over the narrative of what happens in the workplace, which allows them to punish subordinates with little or no resistance. Moreover, the recurrence of unfair practices tends to normalise such behaviour, encouraging its reproduction by other agents within the organisation.

Even when psychological harassment is substantiated, disciplinary consequences often do not follow, especially when the accused holds a senior position. The higher the hierarchical level, the greater the institutional and procedural obstacles to accountability tend to be. Departments responsible for conducting investigations often act with excessive caution, and those in charge may lack neutral and consistent mechanisms to ensure appropriate disciplinary action. Reports of misconduct are sometimes met with disapproval or indifference from colleagues, which contributes to silence and reinforces a broader culture of impunity. In many cases, the whistle-blower is labelled as disruptive or confrontational — a perception that discredits the complaint and discourages others from speaking out. In various situations, the reporting individual is seen as difficult to work with or as a source of conflict, which serves to delegitimise the complaint and inhibit further reports. These dynamics sustain a pattern in which status protects against sanction and abuse becomes normalised. This institutional limitation is reflected in data from Brazil's Federal Court of Accounts (Tribunal de Contas da União), which examined 270 disciplinary proceedings for moral harassment and found that more than 60% were closed without penalty (Brasil. Tribunal de Contas da União, 2022).[1]

Within this permissive environment, behaviours observed in some civil servants — often associated with manipulative uses of power — may be linked to the so-called Dark Triad, which, according to Jonason and Webster (2010), is characterised by self-promoting attitudes at the expense of ethical norms or the collective good.

Many organisations' competitive and aggressive environment, coupled with the apathy — or even complicity — of staff members, fosters the rise of opportunistic profiles, enabling such individuals to build successful careers and attain leadership positions (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010). All staff are embedded in a logic of competition, in which space is secured through technical competence and persuasive ability. Although the pursuit of advancement may be legitimate when guided by meritocratic criteria, it tends to become detrimental when competition takes on destructive forms. Individuals exhibiting traits characteristic of the Dark Triad often gain an advantage in contexts marked by the imposition of ideas and the assertion of authority. In such environments, it is common for them to exaggerate or even fabricate flaws in their rivals' work, to discredit them and undermine their competitive standing. Simultaneously, they tend to overstate the achievements of their allies — even when undeserved — and overlook any shortcomings, as a way of repaying support through undue recognition.

The recurrent presence of individuals exhibiting such behaviour in senior organisational positions reinforces this diagnosis (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010). This proposition is supported by Boddy (2006), who refers to them as corporate psychopaths. According to the author, they represent approximately 1% of the population and readily attain leadership roles due to their ability to persuade and manipulate for personal gain. Studies by Schyns and Schilling (2013) and Erickson, Shaw and Agabe (2007) assert that the consequences of abusive leadership are detrimental to the organisation as a whole, and the harm may be even greater the higher the position of the supervisor within the company.

The pursuit of manipulative power within organisational settings stems mainly from the neglect of this dimension of human nature in the main theoretical frameworks of management. The difficulty in lodging complaints, combined with the absence of corrective measures and clear institutional mechanisms to regulate conduct, creates space for practices aimed at individual gain — even at the expense of discrediting one's peers. An excessive focus on performance and results may contribute to undesirable traits going unnoticed, particularly in contexts marked by job insecurity and unemployment in a highly competitive society.

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[1] Although the analysis addresses organisational dynamics in general, the data cited refer specifically to federal civil servants. Due to the employment stability typical of public service roles in Brazil, the likelihood of reporting abusive conduct may be comparatively higher in this context.

Among the manipulative strategies employed by employees with such profiles, one that stands out is the deliberate creation of barriers to knowledge dissemination. According to Szulanski (1996), Fahey and Prusak (1998), and Sun and Scott (2005), formal command-and-control structures and systems contribute to knowledge retention, as managers centralise the allocation of tasks and the assessment of their execution, including the evaluation of subordinates' performance (Anderson & Brion, 2014). When combined with other practices, the retention of knowledge may also be used strategically to construct the perception that a given employee contributes little to the organisation — or even that their continued presence is unnecessary.

In such contexts, knowledge access itself becomes a means of domination, controlled by those in leadership positions. Although many organisations produce operational manuals and codes of conduct with the aim of guiding activities and promoting best practices, such normative instruments often prove too generic and ineffective in regulating this type of behaviour in practice. In competitive environments, knowledge retention may also operate as an individual strategy of self-preservation and status maintenance. By withholding key information or sharing only partial knowledge, the employee becomes an obligatory reference for certain tasks, increasing their visibility and making replacement more difficult. This behaviour reveals a dual logic of competence and control: while demonstrating technical expertise, the individual simultaneously limits knowledge-sharing as a means of power preservation.

This conduct bears similarities to the logic of the tragedy of the commons — a theory that posits that collective goods, when not adequately regulated, tend to be selfishly appropriated by individuals to the detriment of the common interest. In organisational settings, technical and operational knowledge should be a shared resource to fulfil institutional goals. However, when civil servants treat it as personal property — resisting its dissemination and restricting access — knowledge ceases to circulate and loses part of its collective function. While such behaviour may be understood as rational from the standpoint of individual self-preservation — albeit misaligned with ethical standards — its effects undermine efficiency, innovation, and organisational learning. The absence of effective institutional mechanisms to foster cooperation and recognise technical contributions reinforces this logic of symbolic appropriation, transforming knowledge into an instrument of power.

Continuing this pattern of manipulation, one can also observe the artificial construction of trajectories of success and failure among civil servants. Managers may favour certain subordinates by assigning them tasks with greater visibility, thereby contributing to the construction of a reputation for competence. Conversely, they may disadvantage others by withholding relevant assignments or delegating tasks with a high likelihood of failure. This is, therefore, a strategy that directly influences how merit and performance are perceived among subordinates. Such actions are made possible by the fact that managers control the narrative and, through this, influence how the conduct of favoured or marginalised staff members is judged — individuals who may, as a result, be promoted or dismissed. Exaggerating — though not without reason — one could argue that the world is governed by the opinions shaped by those who excel at constructing narratives.

Although not practiced by all employees, this type of manipulation tends to benefit especially those who have been in the department the longest. As its effects do not impact everyone directly, institutional recognition of the problem becomes weakened, making both its diagnosis and the formulation of solutions more difficult. As a result, there is no collective mobilisation among staff to confront this practice.

In this way, the individual can express opinions on matters to which only they have access, thereby enhancing their competitiveness. Although not adopted by all, this practice tends to benefit especially those who have been in the department the longest. Thus, a barrier is established to the progression of newer employees to preserve the positions held by more experienced staff. This benefit, being concentrated in a group that often occupies roles at the top of the hierarchy, becomes more difficult to mitigate. As Nietzsche (1999, p. 71) summarises when discussing the dynamics of power: *Wherever I found a living creature, there I found the will to power; and even in the will of the servant, I found the will to be master*.

This permissive environment favours the actions of individuals with dysfunctional behavioural traits, such as those associated with the so-called Dark Triad, which undermines the organisational outcomes sought. This condition has been linked to the adoption of unethical and high-risk behaviours, as well as to lower levels of commitment to corporate social responsibility (Jones, 2014; O'Boyle et al., 2012; Spain et al., 2014). Such employees tend to exhibit inappropriate behaviours due to the presence of Machiavellian, psychopathic, and narcissistic traits, as defined in the psychological literature. Wu and LeBreton (2011) highlight that these profiles are frequently associated with undesirable organisational practices, such as destructive leadership and abusive supervision. These subclinical traits have been grouped under the umbrella term Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and reflect short-term social strategies centred on the ego and the exploitation of others.

Indeed, individuals exhibiting Dark Triad traits can cause considerable harm to organisations. As noted by Tepper (2007), abusive leaders' behaviour undermines team productivity, particularly due to the psychological stress it generates. This reality highlights a

mismatch between organisational practice and prevailing theoretical frameworks, which often overlook these dysfunctional forms of power exercise.

Despite this, the main frameworks of management theory — centred on material incentives and formal structures — tend to overlook such impulses. It is worth noting that, in contemporary organisational discourse, there has been a shift from referring to staff as "employees" or "civil servants" to calling them "team members" or "collaborators", alongside the recurrent use of the "family" metaphor to describe the workforce. Occasions such as birthdays and promotions are often celebrated as if they were of universal interest or enjoyment.

Even authors such as Mintzberg (1983) and Pfeffer (1992), who highlight the relevance of political disputes and power relations within organisational environments, remain marginal within the traditional theoretical body focused on productivity. Implicitly, studies in the field of management tend to assume the existence of constructive competition among employees based on the premise that productivity gains would be achieved solely through improved working conditions and higher wages — thereby disregarding the selfish dimension and the pursuit of domination by certain individuals. In the absence of clear theoretical guidance on adopting mechanisms for containment or confrontation, coercive practices are informally incorporated into the organisational routine, often in subtle and concealed ways.

Although such dynamics are observed across various organisational contexts, administrative theories — including the Classical, Behavioural, Structuralist, Systems, Contingency approaches, and Total Quality Management — address different aspects of organisations and the workforce over time but do not consider the deliberate retention of knowledge as a strategic practice aimed at maintaining power or hierarchical position. These theories generally overlook the premise that individuals are driven by self-interest, even though some strands acknowledge this dimension in specific contexts. This omission reveals a significant gap: behaviours guided by self-preservation, internal competition, and the symbolic management of knowledge remain primarily absent from theoretical frameworks concerned with productivity, performance, and organisational efficiency.

In light of this scenario, it becomes necessary to rethink the foundations of management theory, incorporating a more realistic perspective on power dynamics, ethical deviations, and the informal mechanisms that shape organisational behaviour. The lack of a structured approach to these aspects contributes to the reproduction of permissive environments in which the rise of manipulative profiles is not an exception but rather part of the institutional dynamic. Recognising these factors is essential for the development of more effective management policies capable of balancing organisational performance with integrity in workplace relations.

3. Conclusion

Manipulative practices observed within organisational settings — such as the deliberate retention of knowledge, the manipulation of task distribution, and the selective management of subordinates' visibility — reveal forms of power exercised with a focus on self-preservation, internal competition, and the maintenance of prestigious positions. Although recurrent, such behaviours are often normalised by institutions and receive little recognition as legitimate subjects of managerial or academic attention. The lack of institutional response and the scarcity of containment mechanisms contribute to the reproduction of these practices, which directly affect fairness, organisational climate, and the legitimacy of performance evaluation processes.

These practices, by relying on the individual appropriation of a collective good—such as technical knowledge—bear similarities to the logic of the tragedy of the commons, in which the selfish use of shared resources undermines collective interest and the sustainability of the system. The individual's pursuit of maximising personal gain ultimately leads to a decline in collective outcomes.

These dysfunctional practices remain, to a large extent, on the margins of traditional management theory. The main schools — Classical, Behavioural, Structuralist, Systems, Contingency, and Total Quality Management — focus on structural, functional, and motivational aspects of work, but do not systematically address the symbolic dimension of power or the effects of knowledge manipulation as a strategy of domination. Moreover, they generally overlook the premise that individuals act based on self-interest, which undermines the explanatory power of these theoretical models when confronted with informal practices driven by internal competition.

In this context, strengthening organisational cultures guided by ethical principles emerges as a relevant strategy for mitigating dysfunctional behaviours. As noted by Laurijssen et al. (2016), psychopathy in leaders is positively associated with abusive supervision and selfish conduct, although such effects tend to be less pronounced in organisations where an ethical culture is more firmly established. The literature still lacks empirical studies that systematically explore the relationship between narcissistic

leadership and abusive behaviours in collective contexts, given that most research examines the supervisor–subordinate relationship in isolation, without addressing its broader impact on the organisational environment.

Given these limitations, future research should focus on analysing the effects of the Dark Triad across a range of organisational contexts, incorporating different hierarchical levels, sectors of activity, and management approaches. It would be relevant to explore how practices such as knowledge retention, reputation manipulation, and task distribution interact with subclinical traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy — particularly in environments where ethical culture is weak. Similarly, it would be worthwhile to discuss measures to ensure that task allocation is no longer an exclusive prerogative of managerial staff, given its potential for misuse, as well as to reflect on possibilities for hierarchical decentralisation within organisations. Such studies may contribute to the development of more realistic theoretical approaches and a deeper understanding of the complexity of power relations within organisational settings. It is worth remembering that a sound theory can explain phenomena' dynamics as observed in the empirical domain.

As a theoretical essay, this work sought to promote a critical reflection on the exercise of power within organisational settings, emphasising informal practices and behavioural traits often overlooked by traditional management approaches. No empirical surveys were conducted, nor were measurement instruments applied to assess the behavioural traits discussed, which limits the generalisability of the arguments to specific contexts. Furthermore, variations across sectors, hierarchical levels, or institutional configurations were not systematically explored. These aspects represent relevant opportunities for future research, which may adopt qualitative and quantitative methodologies aimed at empirically verifying the hypotheses formulated herein.

In summary, rethinking the foundations of management theory in light of informal power dynamics and behaviours driven by individual interests is necessary for developing more effective management policies. Only by acknowledging the complexity of human relations and the role of ethical culture as a moderator of organisational conduct will it be possible to build fairer, more balanced, and more productive working environments. After all, no organisation is better than those working within it.

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