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Abstract

People tend to view personality as a light-hearted, positive facet of psychology. However, the fact is that there are many unpleasant and dark aspects to personality. Psychologists have identified a grouping of three dark personality traits in subclinical individuals, which is termed the “Dark Triad”. The Dark Triad includes narcissism, psychopathy, and machiavellianism, which have their own unique twists but all have the basis of callous behavior and manipulation of others. This term was coined by researchers Paulhus and Williams (2002) when they measured these constructs and concluded that they were overlapping, but distinct concepts. The origin of these traits in individuals can be attributed to both genetic and environmental factors. In addition, there are strong correlations between popular trait models and the Dark Triad, as well as complex influences of dark traits on interpersonal behavior, occupational behavior, and sexual behavior.

Keywords

dark, triad, personality, psychology, traits

Disciplines

Personality and Social Contexts | Psychology | Theory and Philosophy

Comments

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Brett Burton

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People tend to view personality as a light-hearted, positive facet of psychology. However, the fact is that there are many unpleasant and dark aspects to personality. Psychologists have identified a grouping of three dark personality traits in subclinical individuals, which is termed the “Dark Triad”. The Dark Triad includes narcissism, psychopathy, and machiavellianism, which have their own unique twists but all have the basis of callous behavior and manipulation of others. This term was coined by researchers Paulhus and Williams (2002) when they measured these constructs and concluded that they were overlapping, but distinct concepts. The origin of these traits in individuals can be attributed to both genetic and environmental factors. In addition, there are strong correlations between popular trait models and the Dark Triad, as well as complex influences of dark traits on interpersonal behavior, occupational behavior, and sexual behavior.

WORKING DEFINITIONS AND IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS

The Dark Triad is a grouping of three similar, yet distinguishable, personality traits that are considered to have malevolent qualities. These traits are known as narcissism, psychopathy, and machiavellianism. Psychopathy is understood as having low levels of empathy in addition to high levels of impulsivity and thrill-seeking behavior (Hare, 1985). Machiavellianism can be described as individuals who are cynical, unprincipled, and tend to view manipulation of others as a key for life success (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Lastly, narcissism is defined as feelings of grandiosity, entitlement, as well as dominance and superiority, specifically over others (Corry et al., 2007). While these traits differ from one another in subtle ways, they have a basis of low empathy and high manipulation.

When looking at current popular models of traits such as the Big-5 or HEXACO, we can see some relationships to different aspects of the Dark Triad. Muris and colleagues (2013) assessed personality trait correlates in nonclinical adolescents and found that machiavellianism and psychopathy were associated with low levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and higher levels of emotional instability as well as increased symptoms of aggression and delinquency. This supports previous research that finds disagreeableness, low conscientiousness, and high aggression as highly correlated with Dark Triad traits (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Additionally, Paulhus and Williams (2002) found that psychopathy was associated with low neuroticism and that narcissism has a slight positive correlation with cognitive ability. Interestingly, researchers have put forth the idea of a “Vulnerable Dark Triad” which focuses on negative emotionality, antagonistic interpersonal styles, introversion, and disinhibition, and places traits along a “dark continuum” suggesting we all have some level of pathological traits within our personalities (Miller et al., 2010).

GENETIC/ENVIRONMENTAL ORIGINS

Substantial evidence cites the role of genetics and inheritance in experiencing the Dark Triad. Researchers assessed dark traits of dizygotic and monozygotic twins using behavioral genetic analysis and found evidence for the heritability of psychopathy and narcissism (Vernon et al., 2008). Building on this study, Petrides et al. (2011) used the same methods to analyze dark traits in twins and included a measure of trait emotional intelligence. They found that trait emotional intelligence correlated positively with narcissism and negatively with psychopathy and machiavellianism, and provided further evidence for the influence of genetics. Another team of researchers investigated dark traits in twins, this time assessing correlations between traits in the Supernumary Personality Inventory and the Dark Triad and found significant correlations,

suggesting shared genetic and non-shared environmental factors as playing a role in developing dark traits (Veselka et al., 2011).

While the role of genetics in developing dark traits cannot be understated, the influence of environmental experiences is also paramount. Research finds that of the Dark Triad traits, machiavellianism is the most affected by shared environmental influences (Veselka et al., 2011). There is only a small influence of heritability found for machiavellianism but a large influence of environment, suggesting that the circumstances and life experiences of the individual are crucial in shaping this trait (Vernon et al., 2008; Doherty & Pincus, 2017). While psychopathy and narcissism certainly can be influenced to an extent by one's environment, research supports that machiavellianism's basis lies in the personal experiences of the individual.

INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR

While we have a good grasp of the personality makeup of the Dark Triad, we must investigate the interpersonal behavior of those who have dark traits. Researchers evaluated the perceived darkness of Dark Triad traits by having people rate behavior associated with the various Dark Triad characteristics (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). They found that people perceived narcissism as "brighter" and more desirable than machiavellianism and psychopathy, supporting additional research placing narcissists high in emotional intelligence (Petrides et al., 2011). Around the same time, Rauthmann (2012) investigated the social consequences of the Dark Triad traits by having participants work on a cooperative task in dyads and then completing assessments of themselves and their partner. They found that partners of narcissists did not rate them favorably or unfavorably but did identify arrogance which, while an unpleasant consequence, did not affect communication quality. Machiavellians had condescending views of their partners and reported poor ratings of both themselves and their partners, which the authors

attributed to a potential projection of oneself and possible evocative interaction patterns displayed. Psychopaths were described by their partners as having high dominance and low conscientiousness. Differing from the previous two, psychopaths were seen more negatively and were generally less liked.

Psychopaths tend to have a harder time interacting with others compared to individuals characterized by the other two dark traits. When making moral judgements in daily life, psychopaths put much less consideration into moral judgements associated with harm and fairness (Glenn et al., 2009). However, it turns out that those with predominant dark traits do not have poor interactions with everyone. Glenn and colleagues (2009) found that individuals who are high in psychopathy have an increased endorsement of in-group foundations. Dark personality traits have positive correlations with perception of out-group threat and anti-immigrant stances (Hodson et al., 2009). Additionally, dark personality traits predicted a high social dominance orientation, which can be described as a desire for one's in-group to be superior to out-groups. These traits also predicted a low openness to experience, which predicts right-wing authoritarianism. Building on this, Arvan (2012) measured correlations between political orientation and the Dark Triad and found three times the number of correlations between conservative judgements and the Dark Triad as that with liberal judgements. Furthermore, when assessing humor styles, narcissists prefer affiliative humor, while machiavellians and psychopaths prefer aggressive and derogatory humor (Martin et al., 2012).

Bullying, or aggressive behavior, is often directed towards people deemed to not reside within one's in-group. When assessing bullying behavior in adults, researchers found that psychopathy most strongly correlated with bullying behavior, followed by machiavellianism, and then narcissism (Baughman et al., 2012). When analyzing cyber-bullying behavior in

adolescents, machiavellianism correlated with using social media at higher levels and psychopathy correlated strongly with cyber-aggressing, suggesting both traits play a role in cyber-bullying behaviors (Pabian et al., 2015). While bullying behaviors demonstrate unprovoked aggression, research has also investigated how those high in Dark Triad measures react when they are provoked. Jones and Paulhus (2010) conducted a study to see how psychopaths and narcissists react when provoked and which types of interactions evoke the greatest response. They found that narcissism predicted the most aggressive response to ego threats, such as personal insults, and psychopathy predicted the most aggressive response to a physical provocation, such as a noise-blast in headphones. The Dark Triad traits play a large role in bullying behavior and aggression, but the way individuals with varying levels of these traits experience and express aggression tends to differ.

However, an important caveat is that those who are high in machiavellianism tend to be more deliberate and careful than psychopaths in their actions, and tend to be more aware and influenced by the potential consequences of their behavior (Williams et al., 2010). Machiavellians might refrain from committing a bad act, not for a moral reason, but because they deem that the probability of facing a consequence outweighs the potential reward. This has important implications for businesses, especially ones who have employees working with large sums of money. Research finds that people high in psychopathic traits tend to be self-serving and do not help facilitate the functioning of an organization (Mathieu et al., 2013). Psychologists, such as Mathieu and colleagues, have created tools for businesses that can assess psychopathy in employees.

The implications of the Dark Triad in the workplace are very significant. In a self-reported study assessing self-leadership, the only positive correlation was found to be with

narcissism (Furtner et al., 2011). This is certainly not surprising, as most would argue that every successful leader, by their nature, must have some degree of narcissism. The previously discussed social implications and perceptions of dark traits would also hold steady in the workplace. The Dark Triad affects individuals within the workplace, but also in the realm of education, specifically regarding scholastic cheating behaviors. Possessing the Dark Triad is a significant predictor of self-reported cheating tendencies, however after further analysis, this trend seems to be mainly carried by psychopathy (Williams et al., 2010). It was found that, consistent with common psychopathic behaviors, moral inhibition was a mediator and fear of punishment was not.

We can also observe substantial associations between the Dark Triad traits and sexual behavior. There are distinguishable gender differences, with men having higher levels of Dark Triad traits than women (Furnham & Trickey, 2011). When analyzing sexual behavior, researchers found that a large portion of people who had sexually deviant fantasies would actually end up carrying them out (Williams et al., 2009). When further analyzed, this correlation only held true for those high in psychopathy. We can make sense of this by understanding how psychopaths tend to be low in empathy in addition to high levels of impulsivity, with little concern for the consequences of their actions (Hare, 1985; Williams et al., 2010). While this “makes sense” it is nonetheless rather terrifying. However, when researchers created fictional male characters with high levels and low levels of Dark Triad traits, they found that women preferred the personality of men high in Dark Triad traits and found them more attractive (Carter et al., 2014). This trend is attributed to the idea of women identifying confidence, hard-headedness, and risk taking as an indicator of male quality and being influenced by Dark Triad

traits such as assertiveness and charm.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Dark Triad consists of the malevolent personality traits known as psychopathy, machiavellianism, and narcissism. These traits are correlated with low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness as well as high levels of emotional instability (Muris et al., 2013; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The Dark Triad components of psychopathy and narcissism are largely heritable, where machiavellianism is seen as resulting from life experience (Vernon et al., 2008; Petrides et al., 2011; Veselka et al., 2011). Those with high Dark Triad traits tend to be perceived negatively by others, emphasize affiliation, engage in bullying behaviors, and tend to participate in more scholastic cheating (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012; Rauthmann, 2012; Glenn et al., 2009; Baughman et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2010). Men are higher than women on dark traits and those with high levels of those traits are seen more favorably by women (Furnham & Trickey, 2011; Carter et al., 2014). A limitation of the research is that it is hard to find validity and reliability in self-report measures of people who, by definition, are rather dishonest. Researchers are arguing for an additional trait to be added, comprising the “Dark Tetrad”. It is argued that sadism, deriving pleasure from the pain or humiliation of others, should be added as all parts of the new Dark Tetrad negatively correlate with honesty-humility, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and while it is similar to the other dark traits, it cannot be reduced to them (Međedović, & Petrović, 2015). This fourth component of subclinical sadism has important implications for research, especially in people who hold positions of power.

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