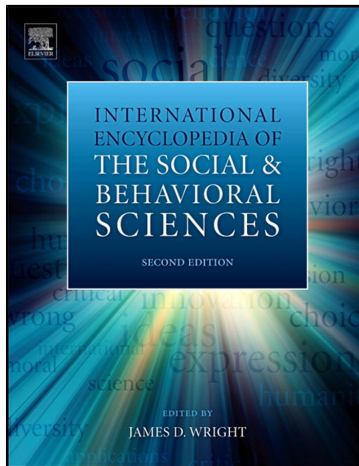


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## Dark Triad: The “Dark Side” of Human Personality

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### Abstract

Most of work in personality psychology has focused on the Big Five traits. However, recent research suggests the Big Five may be insufficient in that it is atheoretically derived and may inadequately assess the ‘darker’ sides of people’s personality. An emerging stream of research has attempted to address this by studying what is called the Dark Triad of personality (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). In this article we attempt to discuss the Dark Triad traits on their own and as a group, we cover different methodological and theoretical considerations, and end by offering some suggestions for the future.

Personality psychology, also called differential psychology, has a long history. The field is concerned with systematic variation between individuals, what causes those differences, how we can document those differences, and how those differences track with real-world outcomes. The best studied set of personality traits are the Big Five traits of extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and openness. These traits are based on words identified as adjectives people use to describe one another (viz., the lexical assumption) through the use of various factor analytic techniques. While other factor structures exist (e.g., Cattell’s 16 Factors; the PEN Model), the Big Five have dominated the last 60 years of research in personality psychology, finding application in all fields of psychological inquiry.

As popular and useful as the Big Five is and as good as the Big Five is at covering a broad range of personality traits, it tends to be limited in two important ways. The Big Five is a set of atheoretically derived, descriptive adjectives and it tends to better tap ‘positive’ aspects of people’s personality over ‘negative’ or ‘darker’ sides. This has created two streams of research, both highly informed by evolutionary or interactionist approaches to understanding within-species variation. One group has focused on expanding the list of basic personality traits; developing what is called the HEXACO. These researchers have focused on the added predictive power of measuring individual differences in people’s honesty and humility. However, this approach is still heavily reliant on factor analytic techniques.

The other – perhaps the newest – stream has focused on what are called the ‘Dark Triad’ of personality traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). Unlike the Big Five or the HEXACO, the Dark Triad traits – as a collective – were not derived through inductive factor analytic techniques, but were, instead, linked based on theoretical observations about the overlap of the behaviors and nature of these traits. Importantly, they also are concerned with ‘darker’ aspects of human nature.

In this article, we discuss the work on the Dark Triad. In particular, we attempt to highlight the apparently good and bad aspects of these traits. This is essential in that even the worst traits confer some benefits if viewed from the proper perspective. As reviewed elsewhere, the predominant way of seeing these traits may be biased toward prosocial outcomes.

That is, if the traits cost the group like in the case of crime, then they are solely seen as bad. We feel this is overly simplistic. Crime is pursued to derive short-term benefits to the criminal at the cost of others. We would argue that research has only focused on the latter half of this last sentence. Apparently costly behavior for the group could have real benefits (e.g., food, mates) for the individual. Even still, the individual may suffer from some disadvantages but, if these traits gear an individual toward maximizing short-term gains as we will argue later, these may be costs he or she is willing to pay.

### The Costs and Benefits of the Dark Triad

#### Narcissism

Narcissism is based on the Greek myth of Narcissus who fell in love with his own reflection and was later identified as a personality disorder. Indeed, most conceptualizations of narcissism have included some dimension of vanity. However, there is a general agreement that narcissism is also composed of other traits like grandiosity, a sense of superiority, and entitlement, although the necessary and sufficient number of factors is a matter of considerable debate. Importantly, narcissism is not simply high self-esteem, though it is positively correlated with it. In fact, narcissism has different effects on aggression depending on the type of self-esteem someone has. In those with stable self-esteem, narcissism is positively correlated with attitudinal aggression, whereas in those with unstable self-esteem, narcissism is negatively correlated with attitudinal aggression. Alternatively, those high in narcissism aggress in response to ego threat as opposed to other threats. Narcissism is a disposition toward an egocentric lifestyle, in which the needs of the self is placed above the needs of others.

One of the hallmarks of narcissism is its inescapable social aspect. Narcissists desire admiration and attention, they wish to feel superior within social circles, and this ties them inextricably to other people. Thus, narcissists employ strategies, which involve improving their relationships with other people. For example, narcissists tend to be overconfident at everything they do, regardless of how good they are, and report being far more competent than others at tasks. While most people tend to overestimate their abilities, narcissists tend to overestimate their abilities more than others. This overconfidence can have

a beneficial effect for the person however, as others are more likely to see them as good leaders, even if their narcissism tends to actually negatively influence group performance. For instance, this overconfidence in their ability leads them to being more resilient in the face of failure.

While it can be difficult for a narcissist to maintain relationships in the long term, they do have a number of advantages in the beginning stages of social relationships. Similarly, narcissism has been linked with other factors with positive social benefits, including higher extraversion, a more affiliative humor style, higher IQ, and a socially charming disposition. Narcissism may even offer some positive effects including self-protective memory biases, the maintenance of one's self-concept across both high- and low-achieving peer groups, increased within-group creativity, and short-term mating success. That said, narcissism remains linked to poor judgment in other areas. Specifically, narcissism has been linked with a higher rate of gambling, as well as an increased amount of money spent on gambling, and these links are mediated by overconfidence, increased risk acceptance, and focus on rewards. Additionally, in tasks where groups of people are asked to harvest a slowly regenerating resource, group performance was worse overall when narcissists were included, as narcissists would tend to overharvest and exhaust resources quicker than others. It seems reasonable to conclude that the Dark Triad may have some short-term benefits and some long-term consequences.

### Psychopathy

Like narcissism, psychopathy traditionally was considered a clinical diagnosis and was adapted to measure a nonclinical construct in the general population. This construct includes such things as impulsivity, criminality, aggressiveness, callousness, limited empathy, and low fear. This has resulted in psychopathy being labeled the ‘darkest’ of the Dark Triad traits. The term carries with it the worst connotations and is a term commonly ascribed to criminals in real life and in the media. In fact, we would contend that the common usage of this term and the tendency to link this term with ‘bad’ people may actually interfere with clear thinking about this trait more so than the other Dark Triad traits.

Just like narcissism, psychopathy appears to be a mixed bag of some beneficial and some deleterious aspects. One interesting finding from such studies is that successful psychopaths (i.e., those that do not get institutionalized) have heightened cardiovascular stress reactivity and perform better on the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (i.e., a measure of cognitive function) compared to unsuccessful (i.e., institutionalized) psychopaths. Furthermore, significant neurological deficits have been found in unsuccessful psychopaths, including greater hippocampal asymmetry, and a 22.3% reduction in prefrontal gray matter volume.

Despite being a socially aversive trait, psychopathy is not entirely without benefits. While psychopathy tends to be linked with low conscientiousness and low agreeableness, it is also linked with low neuroticism, an ostensible benefit. Similarly, psychopaths have lowered stress responses in real-world environments such as appearing in court. This fits the general pattern of impulsiveness, shallow affect, and sensation seeking,

typical of those high on psychopathy. Additionally, some have argued that psychopathy, while having a number of difficulties in long-term scenarios, has a number of short-term advantages. For example, the aggression and short-term mating success all suggest psychopathy might provide some adaptive benefits. If one thing has been made clear in the literature, it is that psychopathy is not the purely negative, maladaptive, and pathological disposition, it is often considered to be.

### Machiavellianism

While the other traits of the Dark Triad were initially pathological disorders that were adapted into measures for nonclinical populations, Machiavellianism was developed for social psychological research. Researchers took inspiration from Niccolò Machiavelli's work *The Prince* to construct a trait characterized by cynicism, manipulateness, and a pragmatic morality. This construct, being based on Machiavelli's work, was termed ‘Machiavellianism.’ These traits might be instrumental for princes (and people) to rise in social and political hierarchies in medieval Europe and today. The trait is considered to have an instrumental way of dealing with others, a protean or whatever it takes style of social influence, and an opportunistic approach to economic exchanges or work behavior. For instance, it is linked with the adoption of both *hard* and *soft* tactics of social influence in the workplace. This range of tactics may better equip those high Machiavellianism to influence others to bending to her or his will.

Much like the other factors of the Dark Triad, Machiavellianism has costly aspects. While high Machiavellian individuals tend to rank high on social charm and manipulateness, Machiavellianism is negatively correlated with self-control, emotional intelligence, and social competency in both intimate and exposed settings. However, seeing these as costs might be overly simplistic. It has recently been argued that limited empathy could itself be advantageous to people motivated to take advantage of others. The idea being that if one understood the feelings of others, it might inhibit their ability to exploit others to their own ends. Indeed, those high on Machiavellianism appear to be skilled liars. Nevertheless, like the other two, the costs and benefits associated with Machiavellianism depend on the context.

### Overlap and Distinctiveness

Contemporary research on the Dark Triad has seen a great deal of debate as to whether the Dark Triad should be treated as a single construct, or whether it is best to treat it as a three-factor solution. Essentially, this debate revolves around two questions. First, which explain more variance in people's behavior, attitudes, and cognition, the three individual traits or a collective, composite of the three? Second, might the Dark Triad be tapping some underlying latent personality trait?

### Unificationism

Proponents of the view that the Dark Triad can be used as a single construct argue the collective allows for higher-order theoretical predictions, whereas the three traits on their own

show the mechanisms by which the latent construct relates to certain outcomes. The point here is that the three traits are imperfect measures of the same or a similar latent disposition. Taking a logical positivism perspective, they contend that personality traits are convenient fictions that allow us to talk about these traits; the traits themselves are not real themselves.

Evidence for the utility of a unitary construct comes in a number of forms, all implying there is an underlying core behind the Dark Triad. First, there are a wide range of personality traits that appear to link the Dark Triad traits together: Agreeableness, dishonest/immodesty, limited empathy, short-term mating, future discounting, and callousness. Second, factor analyses suggest that the three load on a single factor well and account for over 50% of the variance in each construct. Indeed, at least one measure of the Dark Triad returns better fits for structural models that take into account a latent, global factor. Third, so there is at least one case where the latent construct outperforms the three traits on their own when assessing sociosexuality. Fourth, it might be that these traits are simply reflections of similar a disposition with different researchers making the measures, coming from different perspectives, and focusing on different aspects of the underlying profile. That is, we should not assume that because a given trait as conceptually been about X that the original conceptualization was correct.

### Separationism

Their opponents argue that some important relationships can only be found when examining the factors within the Dark Triad, and that it is only through this kind of examination that a fuller, deeper understanding of the construct can be found. They would contend that simply because there are relationships between the three does not mean they are equivalent; after all, the traits of the Dark Triad were chosen *because* they shared a socially aversive component. It should be expected that any set of traits selected to represent the 'dark side' of human personality should, by definition, share a core of being 'dark.' These researchers point the Dark Triad do show some differences in important ways. For example, while both narcissism and psychopathy can predict attitudinal aggression, narcissists tend to aggress toward ego threats, whereas psychopaths tend to aggress toward physical threats. Other factors, such as IQ, are related only to narcissism, while only psychopathy is related to neuroticism, and even within studies showing similar relationships between the three traits, there is often a difference in how strong those relationships are. If some relationships can be isolated to a single trait, and we can see differences in how well each trait can predict other factors, then the claim that they are identical seems inadequate. Indeed, examinations of the various subfactors of narcissism and psychopathy have revealed that it is even suspect to treat the Dark Triad as unified constructs. For example, secondary psychopathy, exploitive narcissism, and Machiavellianism have been linked with a *fast* life strategy, whereas primary psychopathy and grandiose narcissism have been linked with a *slow* life strategy. Additionally, the same cluster of traits related to a 'fast' life strategy (i.e., secondary psychopathy, exploitive narcissism, and Machiavellianism) have been linked with an evening chronotype.

### A Resolution?

The most reasonable position might be to just examine all three levels (i.e., the collective, the three traits, and the parts of the traits). Doing this will allow researchers to test the conditions under which each perspective has its utility and to get a high degree of resolution about the loci of the various relationships they investigate. We would contend that the collective is useful for making higher level predictions regarding the nature of the underlying core, whereas the prediction at the trait level may be more mechanistic. This comes down to the quality of the theory one is using to make their predictions. Most personality psychology predictions are on the order of proximal and descriptive. That is, researchers assemble correlates from other studies to build the case that their two pet variables will be linked. We urge caution here in taking an exploratory approach to examine the subfactors. In contrast, if one has a strong theoretical paradigm (e.g., evolutionary psychology), one can make more sensible predictions but those predictions may not be able to focus on any one of the traits if we assume the traits (or at least their measures) are imperfect themselves. Whether the Dark Triad is treated as a single construct, a three-factor construct, or even a construct with more than three factors, should depend on the situation. Ultimately, it is up to the researcher – guided by theory – to determine the best approach to use for her/his project.

The approaches used to study and understand the Dark Triad vary considerably within the literature. This variation stems from disagreements over what the Dark Triad is, how it should be measured, and most importantly, how we can better understand it in future research. What should be clear here is that the factors within the Dark Triad are conceptually important and distinct components, and that blindly forcing them into a single construct in every situation, regardless of their differences, loses an important part of their utility. Likewise, forgetting their similarities and treating the factors as universally separate and isolated concepts can be just as bad. While there is no clean answer to these problems, future research might provide some answers, however, long this might take. Until then, researchers are advised to carefully consider these points before they commit to any one approach.

### Measurement and Theoretical Issues with the Dark Triad

Arguably, the first task to making any serious advances in any science is having standard metrics. Doing so allows researchers to all 'speak the same language.' Unfortunately, personality psychology tends to resist this trend with most personality constructs having multiple measures. The Dark Triad is no exception. There are various measures of all three traits. Early work relied mostly on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III, and the MACH-IV. However, in hopes of reducing subject fatigue, standardizing a single Dark Triad measure, reducing bloated specificity, and reducing contamination from related constructs the *Dirty Dozen* was created. However, as a brief measure (viz., 12 items) it cannot maintain the heterogeneity in the longer (i.e., 124 items) measures as has been noted by the scale authors and its

critics. Nevertheless, it remains the most well-validated, short, published, brief instrument to assess the Dark Triad. Despite its brevity, it has proved its value in Classical Test Theory and Item Response Theory assessments, the three traits have different correlates, and the measures appear to cover the range of sub-traits (e.g., primary psychopathy, vanity) each of the three constructs contains.

Putting issues of measurement aside, there are some major theoretical considerations. Up until about 2009, nearly all work on the Dark Triad was descriptive. This early work was focused more on accounting for the shared correlation among the Dark Triad. However, descriptive work is extremely limited although it is all-too-common in personality psychology. Thankfully, a number of authors have ventured into different theoretical paradigms to attempt to understand the nature of the Dark Triad. We briefly review some of them here.

A number of theories could be lumped into what we will call interactionist theories (e.g., nature and nurture). Evidence suggests the Dark Triad traits are heritable with each having some degree of susceptibility to environmental contingencies – Machiavellianism, in particular. In addition, the Dark Triad has been linked with many evolutionarily important behaviors, such as a short-term mating style and a ‘fast’ life strategy leading some to examine the Dark Triad from an evolutionary perspective. But if these traits are heritable, how might we account for the continued persistence of the traits in the population?

### Parasites and Hosts

Those high on the Dark Triad do appear to have an exploitive, parasitic, and opportunistic mating style. Might insights from germ theory provide a way to understand the Dark Triad? While reasoning from analogy can have its limitations, we contend that thinking of those high on the Dark Triad as ‘parasites’ and society as the ‘host’ may have some value. Parasites operate on different timelines. Genital herpes operates on a slow timeline. It infects the cells of the host and uses the host to increase its spread through infecting others, but little more than mild flu-like symptoms are observed before the first outbreak. In contrast, influenza operates on a faster timeline. It infects the host, quickly creating fever and even causing death. Simultaneously, the host has strategies to avoid infection and minimize its effects through the behavioral and biological immune system. If the Dark Triad is adaptive, those characterized by the traits need to strike a balance in the timeline of their infection and the strategies they use to promote their inclusive fitness and must ‘trick’ the host. Indeed, people have a heightened amygdala and orbital prefrontal cortex responses to faces of people who score high on a psychopathy measure and those high on the Dark Triad appear to have adaptive strategies to minimize detection. This suggests a coevolutionary arms race between the host and the parasite or the society and the person high on the Dark Triad.

### Life History Theory

Research on the Dark Triad has exploded in the last 5 years. One reason for this has its integration within evolutionary psychology, in particular life history theory. From this

perspective, personality traits are evolutionarily stable strategies designed by natural selection and shaped by environmental contingencies (e.g., harshness and instability in one’s childhood) to enable reproductive fitness. Those high on the these traits might have a ‘fast’ life history strategy geared toward maximizing immediate returns over delayed outcomes as would be predicted by the tradeoffs expressed in life history theory as seen in future discounting, short-term/exploitive mating and social strategies, and impulsivity. The Dark Triad traits could be maintained in the population if some positive fitness benefit is accrued. What is often disparaged as a maladaptive personality can be conceptualized within life history theory as an adaptive stable strategy on a shorter time horizon.

### Niche-Specialization Hypothesis

One of the limitations of evolutionary psychology is that it is too reliant on hypothesized ancestral conditions. As an alternative, one might use behavioral ecology to study within-species variation. In this case, we adopt reasoning by homology. That is, from what we know from primatology we can reason what the role of personality traits might be. Personality traits may drive individuals to select certain environments over others. In order to avoid predation, find food, increase mating success, primates adopt different niches to survive. This might allow for a pairing of trait and niche. That is, because the human socioecology is so varied, individuals can specialize in one or a set of environments to their own benefits. Indeed, those high on the Dark Triad appear to have a preference for the time of the day that would make it easiest for them to take advantages of others and to select friends who serve some function instead of just for enjoyment.

### Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory proposes that behaviors can be thought of as the result of cost-benefit analyses by people attempting to interact with society and the environment. If a person believes that they are able to extract more of a reward through a behavior than they lose by performing it, then the person will perform the behavior. Conversely, when the person feels that the cost will outweigh the benefit, the behavior will not be performed. If someone does not value maintaining a relationship, or is distrustful and does not expect others to follow through with the reward, then the balance would be shifted toward anticipating a lower worth to any social exchange. That is, the relative costs would be higher, and the anticipated rewards would be lower. Such a mind-set could produce a short-term orientation favoring immediate, assured rewards, and would elicit the socially aversive behaviors characteristic of the Dark Triad. However, while we agree that there are costs and benefits, we are suspicious of apparent the Neo-Classical Economics assumption that humans are rational, calculating animals.

### Overall

If we are to continue work on the Dark Triad, we need to keep in mind that it provides both benefits and deficits to individuals in terms of both resource and mate management.

An evolutionary approach can be used to understand not only why the Dark Triad exists, but under what circumstances it can be the most beneficial, and the most detrimental. Understanding what triggers the development of the Dark Triad would be an integral part of discovering how we can either prevent, treat, or utilize Dark Triad strategies. It might be that societal and occupational niches could be found for those high on the Dark Triad, and instead of simply trying to change these individuals to fit what we consider to be 'good,' we might find various roles for them to fill in society; much in the same way that we consider killers bad, and yet employ some people (i.e., army infantry) to go out and kill.

### Limitations and Final Thoughts

Contemporary research on the Dark Triad comprises mainly self-report measures. While this is often considered standard in psychological research, it raises an interesting problem; in Dark Triad research, we ask naturally deceptive people to be honest about their personality. While every attempt is made to ensure participants feel confident that their responses will be anonymous, it is clear that there is no direct benefit from being truthful. With no direct benefit for their honesty, and a potential serious cost if anonymity is not held, it is hard to find a reason for someone high on the Dark Triad to actually be truthful. In addition, self-report measures are prone to any kind of deceptive behavior, including social desirability influences, self-delusion (e.g., a narcissist refusing to admit that they seek attention for whatever reason), and 'faking.' Nonetheless, studies have reliably found links between self-reported Dark Triad scores and external variables, indicating that the self-report measures are managing to tap the constructs they claim to.

Recently, literature has begun to push further outside social and behavioral correlates of the Dark Triad. For example, a number of studies now have linked psychopathy with various neurological factors. While this represents an important step forward, it is important not to get too far ahead of ourselves. The Dark Triad traits are not *real* constructs; they do not exist within the brain, and they are not neurological structures. The Dark Triad traits are descriptors for behavioral patterns, nothing more. While these behavioral patterns might be the result of specific changes within the brain, this certainly does not make them equivalent.

The dispositional approach itself is not immune to this gradual reification either. Any behavioral trait, no matter how reliably linked to other variables, is a descriptor. That is, all traits are abstract concepts that we use to categorize behavior. While this is useful to help predict behavior across situations and examine the relationships between behaviors, it will not, by itself, explain why the behavior occurs. Thus, while the dispositional perspective can provide important insight into behavior, it can never fully account for all aspects of it. One major problem, for example, is that even in a highly sophisticated trait, you can never use it to fully predict responses in every scenario. People with the same trait in the same environment could very well display different behavior.

The field of personality has come a long way since its inception. Most recently, research has focused on examining

behavior in terms of traits, or behavioral descriptors, in which a person's general behavioral trends are summed up into a single constructs. However, preliminary approaches focused too heavily on 'normal' functioning and neglected the more socially aversive aspects of behavior. With the introduction of the Dark Triad, researchers finally had a tool to begin to examine the darker aspects of human personality.

**See also:** Authoritarian Personality; Five Factor Model of Personality, Assessment of; Five Factor Model of Personality, Personality Disorder; Personality Theory and Psychopathology; Personality, Biological Models of; Personality, Evolutionary Models of; Personality, Trait Models of.

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