How “dark” are the Dark Triad traits? Examining the perceived darkness of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy

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ABSTRACT

The current work investigates the perceived “darkness” of the Dark Triad traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. We argue that a trait’s “darkness” may be evaluated by lay persons with three criteria (desirability, consequences for the self, consequences for others) from two perspectives (others vs. self). A sample of n = 213 participants evaluated Dark Triad behaviors (Dirty Dozen: (Jonason, P. K., & Webster, G. D. (2010). The Dirty Dozen: A concise measure of the Dark Triad. Psychological Assessment, 22, 420–432)) on these evaluation dimensions. Findings yielded that narcissism was evaluated as “brighter” than Machiavellianism and psychopathy in lay people’s perceptions, whereas the latter were rated quite similarly. Findings are discussed regarding the distinction of the Dark Triad traits in people’s perceptions.

1. Introduction

How “dark” are narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy? The current work presents different criteria for evaluating the “darkness” of this Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and tests whether lay people discriminate them in any of these. We thus study evaluative perceptions of the Dark Triad and address the following questions: How darkly are the Dark Triad traits perceived by lay people? Do they differ in their perceived darkness?

1.1. The Dark Triad

The sub-clinical forms of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are moderately interrelated and share several characteristics such as self-centeredness, coldness, and manipulation to allow them to “get ahead” while disregarding “getting along” (Jones & Paulhus, 2010). There is some debate of whether these traits should be regarded as separate constructs. The “unification perspective” posits that the Dark Triad reflect (only nuances of) one global dark personality trait (e.g., Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996; McHoskey, 1995, 2001; McHoskey, Worzel, & Szpyrta, 1998; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2010), while the “uniqueness perspective” that they comprise distinct dimensions (e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). Both perspectives have merit and may apply in different cases (Rauthmann, 2012). It has, however, not yet been established to what extent the Dark Triad traits differ in lay people’s evaluations (i.e., how people perceive these traits in themselves and others).

Narcissists1 show an aggrandized, overly enhanced self while devaluing others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993, 2001), often accompanied with extreme vanity, self-absorption, arrogance, and entitlement (Raskin & Terry, 1988). They claim and sometimes attain a host of positive outcomes, such as high status (Brunell et al., 2008; Young & Pinsky, 2006), leadership positions (Deluga, 1997), short-term popularity (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010), and short-term mating success (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002). However, there are also negative sides, such as vulnerability (Miller et al., 2011), less integrity (Blair, Hoffman, & Helland, 2008), and transgressions in long-term relationships (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002).

Machiavellians1 show cold, cynical, pragmatic, and immoral thinking: strategic long-term planning; agentic motivation (e.g., power, money); and deceit and exploitation (Christie & Geis, 1970; Fehr, Samsom, & Paulhus, 1992; Jones & Paulhus, 2009;
1.2. Evaluating “darkness”

How “good vs. bad” a trait is cannot be answered in absolute terms, but we can study people’s abstract and general evaluations of traits as lay theories of traits and personality are pervasive. We contend that these may not be uniform and present three criteria and two perspectives of judgment that people may use (see Table 1).

Perceived benefits of a trait may be judged on three criteria (Judge et al., 2009): Desirability refers to which extent trait-behaviors are considered accepted/desirable (Alicke, 1985; Edwards, 1953), consequences for oneself to which extent trait-behaviors are beneficial for the own organism, and consequences for others to which extent trait-behaviors are beneficial for others. A “dark” trait, as described in the literature, would be judged as socially undesirable, beneficial for oneself, and detrimental for others; a “bright” trait, in contrast, is socially desirable, beneficial for oneself, and entails no or positive consequences for others.

Each of these criteria can be seen from two perspectives (Polman & Ruttan, 2012): The other-perspective – asking what holds for (all) other people – taps general (i.e., canonical, consensusal) and the personal perspective – asking what holds specifically for oneself – distinct (i.e., individual, idiosyncratic) evaluations. There may be differences in what we judge as acceptable for others as a majority versus what is acceptable specifically for ourselves. The other-perspective may stem from consensual socio-cultural knowledge and rules (of conduct), requiring social judgment, and the self-perspective from individual preferences, values, and motivations acquired in ontogenesis and actualized in the current life situation of an individual, requiring self-insight.
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