



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.

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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, & Szyarto, 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).

*Narcissists*¹ 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).

Machiavellians 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;

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¹ The terms “narcissist”, “Machiavellian”, and “psychopath” are not used as diagnostic labels or imply psychopathology, but are solely used as abbreviations for people who score (relatively) high on the respective personality dimensions.

Rauthmann, 2011; Rauthmann & Will, 2011). They are described as cunning impression managers, self-beneficial, low in pro-social orientations, less intrinsically motivated at work, and power-oriented (Barker, 1994; Becker & O'Hair, 2007; Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009; McHoskey, 1999), which makes them socially undesirable. Yet, they are also judged favorably and preferred as leaders (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Deluga, 2001; Drory & Gluskinos, 1980; Hawley, 2003; Ickes, Reidhead, & Patterson, 1986; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1998).

Psychopaths show impulsive thrill-seeking, irresponsibility, lack of empathy, interpersonal manipulation, and antisocial behavior (Hare, 2003; Salekin, Leistico, & Mullins-Nelson, 2006; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2003). Although they get their way in work environments (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Boddy, 2006) and perform well in short-term mating contexts (Jonason et al., 2009), they are destructive for themselves and others (e.g., alcohol consumption, violence: Neumann & Hare, 2008; misconduct and delinquency: Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007).

This cursory review of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy evinces that many of their characteristics may be described as “toxic,” but upon closer look, they harbor each beneficial *and* detrimental trajectories for themselves and others. The questions thus arise what “darkness” is and how darkly the Dark Triad are perceived.

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, consensual) and the *personal perspective* – asking what holds specifically for oneself – distinct (i.e., individual, idiosyncratical) 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.

Table 1
Underlying questions of the six evaluation dimensions.

Criterion	Perspective	
	Self: How is it for me?	Others: How is it for the many?
Desirability	<i>How desirable is the action for me personally?</i>	<i>How desirable is the action for people in general?</i>
Consequences for the self	<i>How beneficial is the action for me personally when I enact it?</i>	<i>How beneficial is the action for people in general when they enact it?</i>
Consequences for others	<i>How beneficial is the action for others when I specifically enact it?</i>	<i>How beneficial is the action for others when people in general enact it?</i>

Note: Each of the six evaluative ratings was requested for each of the 12 Dirty Dozen items.

2. The current study

By crossing the three evaluation criteria with the two perspectives, we obtain six different evaluation dimensions for the “darkness” of a trait. These can be seen as abstract attitudes that people harbor about a trait or its behaviors. The Dark Triad traits have so far not been evaluated on any of these dimensions, but simply labeled as “dark.” But how do people perceive the Dark Triad? Lay theories about trait-behaviors may influence how (a) we think and feel about them, (b) we judge others when they enact such behaviors, and (c) we evaluate ourselves when we do. Moreover, studying perceptions of traits can tell us about their “darkness” from a lay-perspective. Findings also unveil to what extent a unification or uniqueness position holds in these perceptions and would thus inform us further on uniform vs. unique or distinct effects of the Dark Triad.

First, we hypothesized that narcissism would be perceived more favorably than Machiavellianism and psychopathy because (a) some narcissistic behaviors may be more desirable in Westernized cultures (e.g., boldness, seeking status), (b) there are ample arguments for evolutionary benefits of narcissism (e.g., Holtzman & Strube, 2010, 2011), and (c) Machiavellianism and psychopathy are pretty similar in their antagonistic behavioral style (Rauthmann, 2012). The Dark Triad traits should thus not be perceived equally by lay persons.

Second, we hypothesized that lay people would discriminate between desirability, consequences for oneself, and consequences for others. Also, evidence suggests that people form different ratings depending on whether they pertain to others or the self (Polman & Ruttan, 2012). Thus, lay person evaluations should not reflect one global good vs. bad rating.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and procedure

We instructed students from a psychology seminar to gather data on at least ten non-university people (five women, five men) and thereby adhere to APA ethical standards. The acquired participants did not obtain any form of compensation. We obtained data from $N = 244$ participants (123 female, 121 male; mean age = 30.64 years, $SD = 11.41$, range: 18–75) on paper-pencil measures. Due to some missing values, $N = 213$ remained for analysis of variance (ANOVA) computations. People provided ratings of the Dark Triad on all six evaluation dimensions with filler tasks in between (see online supplemental material OSM A for the full design).

3.2. Measures: evaluations

Dark Triad items to be evaluated were constructed from the Dirty Dozen scale (Jonason & Webster, 2010). It was chosen because it could be easily used for evaluation ratings and is short and concise so as to prevent strain on the side of raters (because each item had to be presented six times in total). People were

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