The young and the restless: Examining the relationships between age, emerging adulthood variables, and the Dark Triad

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The Dark Triad is a set of correlated personality variables (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) that are related to myriad behaviors. Myriad studies have been conducted to test the relations between the Dark Triad and other personality variables (e.g., the Big 5); however, the developmental correlates have been understudied. In the current study, we examined how markers of emerging adulthood and age predict the Dark Triad traits using a cross-sectional design. Participants ($N = 442$) of varying ages (M age = 32.99, range = 18–74) completed Dark Triad measures and a validated questionnaire used to assess the degree to which participants believe they have successfully navigated through various facets of emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood facets (e.g., negativity, other-focused, and feeling in-between) correlated with several Dark Triad traits. Additionally, several emerging adulthood facets mediated the relation between age and the Dark Triad traits; i.e., older participants were lower on the Dark Triad traits because of the successful transition through emerging adulthood. Results are discussed in terms of the Theory of Emerging Adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

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1. Introduction

The Dark Triad traits are three personality variables (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) that have theoretical and statistical overlap (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissism is characterized by having an inflated, grandiose, and, often, unrealistic sense of self (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Machiavellianism is often characterized by immoral flattery, deceit, and dishonesty (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Finally, psychopathy is partitioned into primary, characterized by selfishness, untruthfulness, callousness, and manipulativeness, and secondary constructs, characterized by impulsivity (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Studying the variables that predict or correlate with the Dark Triad traits is of theoretical and practical importance. Indeed, the Dark Triad traits are related to self-reported aggression (Jonason & Webster, 2010), violence (Jones & Olderbak, 2014), and risk-taking (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013). While there is a paucity of research testing the developmental predictors of the Dark Triad traits, there is a wealth of research that has elucidated other personality correlates of the Dark Triad traits. For instance, low empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012), impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011), self-enhancement (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), poor self-control (Jonason & Tost, 2010), low agreeableness (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), neuroticism (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006), and low conscientiousness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Jonason & Webster, 2010) are positively correlated with the Dark Triad traits.

Despite the recent surge in research testing the correlates of the Dark Triad traits, several theoretical questions remain unanswered. First, it is unclear, from a developmental lens, how age and developmental markers are related to the Dark Triad traits. Second, potential developmental mediators have yet to be tested in the relation between age and the Dark Triad traits. The current study sought to fill gaps in the literature by having participants of varying ages (18–74 years) complete measures of emerging adulthood, psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism in order to test (a) the correlation between age and the Dark Triad traits, (b) whether emerging adulthood variables were related to the Dark Triad traits, and (c) whether the relation between age and the Dark Triad traits is mediated by emerging adulthood indices.

1.1. Emerging adulthood

The transitional period when individuals leave late adolescence and enter adulthood (ages 18–25) is termed emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).[1] This time is often marked with drastic personal and life changes,

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[1] This trend is not ubiquitous. Arnett (2000) suggests that the emerging adulthood period is predominantly found in Western cultures and for those who can financially support such exploration. Also, Arnett posits that certain life changes (e.g., having a baby at a young age or getting married right out of high school) will decrease the likelihood of proceeding through emerging adulthood and transition from adolescence straight to adulthood.

such as starting college, moving out on one's own, beginning work at a full time job, financial independence from parents, marriage, and possibly parenthood. Furthermore, this developmental period is a time of great identity development (e.g., Waterman, 1982) given the life changes that could be shaping emerging adult's lives. Emerging adulthood has been theoretically partitioned into several factors that are important for life transitions: identity exploration (i.e., time of experimentation with different roles), experimentation (i.e., optimism at the availability of life's options), negativity/instability (i.e., feeling overwhelmed with or unable to handle the multitude of available options and decisions to be made), feeling in-between (i.e., no longer an adolescent but not yet an adult), self-focus (i.e., focus on the self while gaining knowledge and forming worldviews), and other-focus (i.e., counterpart to self-focus; focus on needs of others; Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007). Indeed, participant age is related to these markers (Arnett, 2001), suggesting that a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood is characterized by these emerging adulthood facets. Furthermore, because emerging adulthood is characterized by exploring one's identity, once an individual has navigated into adulthood, these emerging adulthood facets should be less relevant. For instance, a 55 year old individual should score relatively low on these emerging adulthood facets (except for other-focused, which should increase with age), whereas a 22 year old should score relatively high. For this example, the 55 year old has already transitioned beyond emerging adulthood into adulthood and should have a less malleable sense of identity which stands in contrast to the 22 year old whom is more likely to still be exploring their identity and, thus, in the emerging adulthood transition. Because of this reasoning, we expect age to negatively correlate with emerging adulthood facets in our sample.

For some, the emerging adult developmental period is marred with difficulties. The successful transition through emerging adulthood is, in part, reflected in impulse control, behavioral control, and quality decision making (Arnett & Taber, 1994). These variables continually decrease from adolescence to emerging adulthood and decrease again from emerging adulthood to adulthood (Peach & Gaultney, 2013). Given these findings, as age increases emerging adulthood facets should decrease (again, with the exception of other-focused, which should increase), which has direct relevance to the study of the Dark Triad traits. Indeed, self-control is negatively related to Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Jonason & Tost, 2010). These findings correspond to our theoretical position that age will be negatively related to the Dark Triad traits because of changes in emerging adulthood facets. Related to the Dark Triad, age has been found to negatively correlate with psychopathy (Harpur & Hare, 1994), narcissism (Wilson & Sibley, 2011), and Machiavellianism (Mudrack, 1989). However, no published work that we are aware of has merged these findings together to posit that emerging adulthood changes contribute to the reason why age and the Dark Triad traits are correlated.

Despite the theoretical rationale that we have posited regarding our hypothesized mediated links between age and the Dark Triad traits through emerging adulthood facets, it is unclear which specific emerging adulthood facets will mediate the relations between age and specific Dark Triad traits. Based on the Theory of Emerging Adulthood (Arnett, 2000), we expect age to be negatively related to the emerging adulthood facets, except for other focused, which should be positively correlated with age (e.g., the link between the independent variable and mediators); however, the relations between specific emerging adulthood facets to Dark Triad traits (e.g., the link between the mediators and dependent variables) remains less clear. For example, certain variables (e.g., Openness or Neuroticism) significantly correlate with certain Dark Triad traits (e.g., narcissism), but not others (e.g., psychopathy or Machiavellianism; Jonason & Webster, 2010 Study 1). Therefore, we make no unique predictions here because of the lack of published empirical work on the matter and the exploratory nature of the study. Clearly, we will test such relations to fill this gap in the literature.

1.2. Overview of the current study

The objective of the current study is to further our understanding of the Dark Triad traits by examining their relations with markers of a successful transition through emerging adulthood. Based on the past research, we predict that (a) age will negatively predict emerging adulthood markers (older adults who have transitioned out of this age group should score lower on emerging adulthood variables [except other-focused]), (b) age and emerging adulthood markers should negatively correlate with the Dark Triad traits, and (c) the relations between age and the Dark Triad traits will be mediated by emerging adulthood variables.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Five hundred and forty-two participants (323 male) were recruited using Mechanical Turk (a web-based service that compensates users for human tasks). The average age of the sample was 32.91 ($SD = 10.78$) years. The sample was primarily Caucasian (78%) and self-reported middle class (41%). Data from 40 participants were discarded because they failed to correctly answer a question that indicated they were attending to the directions and questions. Upon completion of the informed consent, participants completed the following questionnaires prior to being thanked, debriefed, and compensated ($0.75 US).

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Emerging adulthood markers

The IDEA (Reifman et al., 2007) measures aspects of how young adults self-identify with the emerging adulthood period. This measure included 31 items scored on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) rating scale. Six subscales were calculated, which included: identity exploration (7 items; $\alpha = .86$), experimentation (5 items; $\alpha = .83$), negativity (7 items; $\alpha = .87$), other-focused (3 items; $\alpha = .74$), self-focused (6 items; $\alpha = .84$), and feeling in-between (3 items; $\alpha = .84$). These scores were averaged such that higher values indicate higher levels of these emerging adulthood variables.

2.2.2. Narcissism

The Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997) was used to assess narcissism. Participants rated how characteristic ten items were of them on a 1 (very uncharacteristic or untrue, strongly disagree) to 5 (very characteristic or true, strongly agree) rating scale. A sample item includes, "I dislike sharing the credit of an achievement with others." Items were summed, such that higher scores indicate higher levels of narcissism ($\alpha = .80$).

2.2.3. Psychopathy

The Levenson et al. (1995) Psychopathy Scale was used to assess psychopathy in non-institutionalized participants. Participants rated their level of agreement with the items on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) rating scale. The Primary Psychopathy subscale ($\alpha = .90$) consists of 16 items and a sample item includes, "Looking out for myself is my top priority". The Secondary Psychopathy subscale ($\alpha = .78$) consists of nine items and a sample item includes, "Love is overrated". Certain items were reverse scored and then summed. Higher scores indicate higher levels of primary and secondary psychopathy.

2.2.4. Machiavellianism

The Mach IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) was used to assess trait levels of Machiavellianism. This is a 20 item questionnaire that asks participants to indicate their level of agreement on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) rating scale ($\alpha = .84$). A sample item includes, "Anyone