



The Dark Triad, schadenfreude, and sensational interests: Dark personalities, dark emotions, and dark behaviors



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ABSTRACT

This research examined the associations between the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy), sensational interests, and schadenfreude. One-hundred and eighty-six adults completed an online survey comprising the Dirty Dozen, the Sensational Interests Questionnaire Revised, and an author-generated measure of expressed schadenfreude. Higher levels of the Dark Triad were associated with higher levels of sensational interests and higher levels of schadenfreude; psychopathy was the most strongly related to both. These findings suggest a cluster of “dark” personalities, behaviors, and emotions. That is, those higher on the Dark Triad engage in more antisocial activities and experience greater satisfaction at the misfortune of others. Implications for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A recent flurry of interest regarding the Dark Triad (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) has led to a significant body of knowledge regarding those attitudes and behaviors associated with this personality cluster. This cluster of dark personality traits has a shared tendency toward emotional coldness, aggressiveness, and self-promotion (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). While a number of studies have examined associated behaviors and attitudes, such as short term mating strategies (Jonason & Buss, 2012), prejudice (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009), and cruelty to animals (Kavanagh, Signal, & Taylor, 2013), few have investigated the associations between this cluster of dark personalities, emotional experiences, and their associated pass-times. It is conceivable that given dark personalities experience dark emotions (Porter, Bhanwer, Woodworth, & Black, 2014), they would have equally dark interests and hobbies, with associations between personality, emotional experiences, and antisocial interests.

2. Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude, a German term referring to the experience of pleasure at another's misfortune (Feather & Nairn, 2005), is a concept that has received limited attention. Characteristics proposed to influence schadenfreude include resentment, deservingness (Feather & Nairn, 2005), envy (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006), likability (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; van Dijk et al., 2006), self-esteem (van Dijk, van Koningsbruggen, Ouwerkerk, & Wesseling, 2011), and competition (Smith, Powell, Combs, & Schurtz, 2009). Only one study has recently investigated the extent to which the Dark Triad traits are associated with the expression of this emotional response (Porter et al., 2014). Many of the behaviors characteristic of the Dark Triad are similar to those preceding schadenfreude. For example, a lack of empathy or callousness (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013), competitiveness (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010), and a tendency to dislike others (Rauthmann, 2012). Lack of empathy is shared by all three aspects of the Dark Triad and provides a strong conceptual link between these dark personalities and the experience of schadenfreude (Porter et al., 2014; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). There are two possible emotional reactions in the face of another's misfortune; a negative emotional reaction presented as sympathy, or a positive emotional reaction depicting schadenfreude (Heider, 1958). Therefore, someone who lacks empathy would be more likely to experience some degree of pleasure – or schadenfreude.

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Those high on the Dark Triad traits are primarily driven to achieve their own goals (Jonason & Webster, 2012), and their emotional coldness allows them to disregard others' feelings in pursuit of those goals (Jonason et al., 2013). Given the associations between the Dark Triad and competitiveness (Jonason et al., 2010), those individuals characterized by the Dark Triad traits may view another's misfortune more favorably as it positions them closer to achieving their own goals. They are unlikely to consider the emotions of the person experiencing the misfortune, rather envisage what they can gain from the situation, with a likely gain being a social influence tactic (e.g., using the misfortune as a means of social comparison in order to influence those around them (Jonason & Webster, 2012)). Someone else's misfortune enables the use of downward social comparison, allowing one to position her/himself in a more positive light. Schadenfreude is less frequent in those with high self-esteem (van Dijk et al., 2011)—a common characteristic associated with the Dark Triad (Jonason et al., 2010)—but is associated with a fragile ego (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998); although only vulnerable narcissists require constant feedback from those around them to maintain their sense of self-worth (Miller et al., 2010). Consequently, it is plausible that vulnerable narcissists use schadenfreude as a strategy to enhance their self-esteem and that higher levels of the Dark Triad might be associated with increased schadenfreude.

3. Sensational interests

Research into sensational interests—an interest in violent and unusual topics such as weapons, crime, and military—has mainly focused on psychologically disordered criminal populations (Egan, Austin, Elliot, Patel, & Charlesworth, 2003) or their association with criminal offending (Charles & Egan, 2009). A few studies have explored interest in these areas by non-clinical, non-forensic populations, but the primary focus has been with the Big Five personality traits. For example, sensational interests are linked to low agreeableness and low conscientiousness (Egan et al., 2003)—traits consistently seen in the Dark Triad (Lee & Ashton, 2005). Little is known about the personality correlates of sensational interests outside of the Big Five (Egan et al., 1999).

Sensational interests and the Dark Triad have a shared tendency towards high impulsivity and thrill seeking (Egan, Charlesworth, Richardson, Blair, & McMurrin, 2001; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), valuing power over others (Egan et al., 1999), and aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Narcissism is related to functional impulsivity (i.e., fast thinking and rapid social engagement) while psychopathy is associated with dysfunctional impulsivity (poor decision making and a lack of ability to inhibit antisocial impulses; Jones & Paulhus, 2011). This suggests that sensational interests may be particularly more common among those who score high in the psychopathy component of the Dark Triad.

4. The current study

The aim of the current study is to identify associations between the Dark Triad traits, schadenfreude, and sensational interests to further understand the emotional and behavioral characteristics of people with these "Dark Personalities". Specifically, we predict that people with higher levels of the Dark Triad will have increased levels of sensational interests and experience greater levels of schadenfreude. Finally, given recent controversy in the literature regarding the analysis of the Dark Triad as a latent factor versus separate unique constructs, two separate models will be tested to help determine which of these offers the best explanation for the seen associations (Jones & Figueredo, 2013).

5. Method

5.1. Participants and procedure

A snowball sampling method of recruitment was used whereby participants were asked to forward study details to people in their social network who may be interested in participating. Facebook friends and email contacts of the researchers were first contacted as an initial participant pool. Two hundred and thirty-two adults initially started the online survey; however, 46 did not complete all of the questions leaving a reduced sample of 117 females ($M_{Age} = 23.04$, $SD_{Age} = 2.15$) and 69 males ($M_{Age} = 45.04$, $SD_{Age} = 13.97$). Ninety percent of participants were Australian; 4% were American, and the remaining 6% were Algerian, Canadian, German, Iranian, New Zealander, Peruvian, Swedish, and British.

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. The dark triad

The Dark Triad was measured using the Dirty Dozen, a 12-item short measure of the Dark Triad, with four items per subscale (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as "I have a natural talent for influencing people," "I tend to manipulate others to get my way," and "I tend to lack remorse." The items for each subscale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha_{narcissism} = .83$, $\alpha_{Machiavellianism} = .78$, $\alpha_{psychopathy} = .76$), as did the global Dark Triad scale ($\alpha = .85$) and were, therefore, averaged to create indices of narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and an overall Dark Triad index, with higher scores indicating higher levels of these traits.

5.2.2. Sensational interests

Sensational interests were measured using the Sensational Interests Questionnaire Revised (SIQ-R; Weiss, Egan, & Figueredo, 2004). Participants were asked to express their interest level in 19 topics using a Likert scale (1 = *great disinterest*; 7 = *great interest*) over 3 subscales (i.e., Militarism, Paranormal Interests, and Criminal Identity). Topics include things such as drugs, Military Special Forces, and death symbolism. Participants were also asked to rate their level of knowledge on these topics and level of importance in their lives using the same Likert scale. Participants' interest, knowledge, and importance scores were then averaged to create an overall score for each topic. Analyses revealed that the measure had excellent internal consistency for the overall scale ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 48.64$, $SD = 15.70$), and for two of the three subscales (Militarism: $\alpha = .90$, $M = 22.9$, $SD = 9.70$; Paranormal Interests: $\alpha = .80$, $M = 14.89$, $SD = 5.60$); however, not for the third (Criminal Identity: $\alpha = .55$, $M = 9.04$, $SD = 3.33$). Moderate significant associations ($ps < .001$) between each of the three subscales (Paranormal Interests and Militarism: $r = .37$; Militarism and Criminal Identity: $r = .52$; Criminal Identity and Paranormal Interests: $r = .50$) were found. Given low internal consistency of one of the subscales, the moderate associations between the subscales, and the high internal reliability of the overall scale, a decision was made to create a composite score of sensational interests with higher scores indicating higher levels of sensational interests.

5.2.3. Schadenfreude

Previous studies have commonly measured schadenfreude via vignettes that instruct participants to rate their response in terms of amusement, satisfaction, pleasure/happiness, and/or sympathy (Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003; van Dijk et al., 2006). Scenarios in previous research have typically used samples such as

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