The Dark Triad, the Big Five, and the HEXACO model ☆

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ABSTRACT

The "Dark Triad" of Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and psychopathy has received much research attention since the seminal article of Paulhus and Williams (2002). The introduction of the Dark Triad came shortly after the discovery of a six-dimensional model of personality characteristics, now called the HEXACO model. One of the HEXACO factors—Honesty–Humility—is essentially equivalent (at its opposite pole) to the common element shared by the Dark Triad variables. We suggest that the emergence and popularity of the Dark Triad reflect the importance of these characteristics and their underrepresentation in five-dimensional models of personality. We note that optimal prediction and understanding of criterion variables is better achieved using the HEXACO factors than using an ad hoc combination of the Big Five and a Dark Triad composite.

1. Introduction

When Paulhus and Williams (2002) wrote their seminal article on the "Dark Triad"—Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and psychopathy—they brought attention to three personality characteristics of obvious importance in human affairs. Although these three characteristics were clearly not redundant with each other, they did have some substantial empirical and conceptual overlap. This overlap, moreover, could be accounted for only in part by the Big Five personality factors (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and in subsequent years some studies examined the Dark Triad variables, in addition to the Big Five, as predictors of important criterion outcomes (e.g., Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). In this way, the Dark Triad was an important contribution to personality psychology, as it highlighted three manifestations of a common tendency to be exploitive and manipulative of others.

The introduction of the Dark Triad roughly coincided with the development of a new model of personality structure, one that incorporated findings from lexically-based investigations across several languages (Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2008). This new, six-dimensional framework—the HEXACO model—includes a

factor called Honesty–Humility, defined by traits such as sincerity and modesty versus greed, deceit, and conceit. When this factor was identified in a Korean lexical study of personality structure by Hahn, Lee, and Ashton (1999), the authors alerted readers to its potential significance. Specifically, they wrote that "this additional lexical factor suggests similarities to certain other personality constructs, including Machiavellianism of Christie and Geis (1970), Jackson's Social Adroitness, Wiggins' (1979) Arrogant-Calculating versus Unassuming-Ingenuous, and certain aspects of psychopathy of Harpur, Hare, and Hakstian (1989)" (p. 279). Interestingly, the list of the variables suggested in that report to be similar to the low pole of the sixth lexical factor includes two of the Dark Triad as well as a variable closely parallel to Narcissism (i.e., Arrogant-Calculating versus Unassuming-Ingenuous). Some of these relations were empirically verified later in a study involving a Korean lexical marker scale representing Honesty–Humility (Ashton, Lee, & Son, 2000). As we discuss below, the similarity between the Dark Triad variables and low Honesty–Humility has since been confirmed in other studies.

2. The Dark Triad and Honesty–Humility

A few studies have directly examined the relations of the Dark Triad with the Honesty–Humility factor (as operationalized in the HEXACO Personality Inventory [–Revised]; HEXACO-PI[-R]). These investigations have found the low pole of the Honesty–Humility factor to be essentially identical to the common element

of the Dark Triad variables (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Lee et al., 2013). In two separate samples, Lee et al. found the common variance shared by the Dark Triad to be practically identical to (low) Honesty–Humility, with latent correlations ranging from −.80 to −.94 for self-reports and from −.84 to −.94 for observer reports. In the same report, it was found that the *unique* elements of each Dark Triad variable were also related to HEXACO dimensions: Machiavellianism overlapped with low Agreeableness (A; that is, HEXACO Agreeableness, not Big Five Agreeableness) and low Extraversion (X), Narcissism with high X, and psychopathy with low Conscientiousness (C) and low Emotionality (E). Jones and Figueredo (in press) also examined the nature of the common core of the Dark Triad, and reported a result that is largely consistent with the conclusion of Lee et al. (2013). Specifically, the common core of the Dark Triad variables was found to be highly saturated by the Interpersonal Manipulation facet of the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press), which corresponds strongly to Honesty–Humility.[1]

The close similarity between the core of the Dark Triad and low Honesty–Humility can also be shown by the list of the outcome variables frequently examined in relations to these variables. Researchers examining Honesty–Humility and the Dark Triad have tended to choose very similar outcome variables. For example, a variety of sexual behaviors have been frequently investigated in these studies, including mate retention tactics (Holden, Zeigler-Hill, Pham, & Shackelford, 2014; Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010) and short-term mating strategy (Bourdage, Lee, Ashton, & Perry, 2007; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). Other studies have examined the Dark Triad or Honesty–Humility in relation to sociopolitical variables, including Social Dominance Orientation (Hodson et al., 2009; Lee, Ashton, Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Shin, 2010), general political orientation (Arvan, 2013; Leone, Chirumbolo, & Desimoni, 2012), and prejudice (Hodson et al., 2009; Sibley, Harding, Perry, Asbrock, & Duckitt, 2010). In addition, the Dark Triad and Honesty–Humility have been examined with respect to risk taking and sensation seeking (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013; De Vries, De Vries, & Feij, 2009; Weller & Tikir, 2011), bullying behaviors (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012; Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012), and delinquent behaviors (Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009; Dunlop, Morrison, Koenig, & Silcox, 2012). Other research has examined the relations of Honesty–Humility and of the Dark Triad with the scales of the Supernumerary Personality Inventory (SPI, Paunonen, 2002), an inventory assessing personality traits not well accommodated within the Big Five space (Lee, Ogunfowora, & Ashton, 2005; Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2011). The results of these studies generally suggest that the Dark Triad and Honesty–Humility are strong predictors of the variables mentioned above.

The variables predicted by the Dark Triad and Honesty–Humility represent diverse aspects of human life, ranging from sexual behaviors to bullying, and from risk taking to political orientations. This breadth suggests that the Dark Triad and Honesty–Humility are of particular importance in understanding human behavior, and highlights the shortcomings of personality structural models that do not fully represent this dimension (see Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2012).

3. Empirical and theoretical advantages of the HEXACO model

In the first few years that followed the introduction of the Dark Triad, some researchers supplemented Big Five measures with Dark Triad measures when studying outcomes that had some plausible connection to the latter (Hodson et al., 2009; Jonason et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2010). Such studies reflected researchers' recognition that the Big Five model, which has been the most popular model of personality structure, is suboptimal in capturing individual differences in manipulation and entitlement (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Veselka et al., 2012). Grafting the Dark Triad onto the Big Five is an effective way of correcting this deficiency, but now that the HEXACO framework is well known, it is apparent that this somewhat inelegant approach is not ideal: The variance of the Big Five and the Dark Triad are captured by the HEXACO factor space, whose dimensions are nearly orthogonal and also possess an integrated theoretical basis.[2] We should first note that there has been no evidence thus far suggesting that the ad hoc model of Big-Five-plus-Dark-Triad (hereafter the B5-plus-D3 model) shows any predictive advantages over the HEXACO model. In one of the few studies comparing the predictive validity of the B5-plus-D3 model with that of the HEXACO model, Lee et al. (2013) showed that the HEXACO model generally outperformed the B5-plus-D3 model with regard to criterion variables representing the sex and money domains. The predictive advantage of the HEXACO factors generalized across self- and observer reports of personality.

Beyond the practical issue of predictive validity, adopting the HEXACO model has two critical advantages over the ad hoc B5-plus-D3 model. First, because the Dark Triad had been developed independently from the Big Five factors, no effort was made to reduce the conceptual redundancy between the two sets of personality variables. For example, in Lee et al's datasets, the multiple correlation obtained by the BFI variables was .61 ($N = 232$) in predicting a composite measure of the Dark Triad, and the corresponding figure obtained by the NEO-FFI variables was .57 ($N = 200$). As pointed out by Saucier (2002), a model consisting of highly correlated factors is undesirable in terms of its usefulness both as a structural map in which other variables are located and also as a parsimonious set of predictors. In contrast, because the HEXACO model was developed to operationalize six roughly orthogonal factors, Honesty–Humility does not show such substantial overlap with the other personality variables in the model. In the two samples mentioned above, the corresponding multiple correlations obtained by the remaining HEXACO factors in predicting Honesty–Humility were .36 and .44.

A second advantage of the HEXACO framework over the B5-plus-D3 model follows from the finding that Honesty–Humility is roughly isomorphic with the common variance of the Dark Triad variables. This result means that the theoretical interpretations proposed for Honesty–Humility can also be applied to the Dark Triad. As we have explained elsewhere (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2001, 2007), Honesty–Humility represents individual differences in an inclination to cooperate with others even when one could successfully exploit or defect against them (i.e., fairness-based cooperation). The common element of the Dark Triad can therefore be viewed as a willingness to exploit others when this is perceived to be advantageous.

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[1] In this study, SRP Callousness was also found to have a strong secondary association with the core of the Dark Triad (see Fig. 1 in Jones & Figueredo, in press), whereas in Lee et al.'s study (2012), the HEXACO construct closest to Callousness (i.e., low Emotionality) did not underlie the common variance of the Dark Triad. This inconsistency might be explained at least in part by the substantial element of low Honesty–Humility within the SRP-III Callousness scale (see, e.g., Table 3 of Gaughan, Miller, & Lynam, 2012), which also correlates substantially with SRP-III Interpersonal Manipulation (correlations in the mid .60 s in Jones and Figueredo's datasets).

[2] Miller, Gaughan, Maples, and Price (2011) have noted that Narcissism and psychopathy are strongly related to the NEO-PI-R measure of Agreeableness, largely by virtue of its Straightforwardness and Modesty facets—the same facets HEXACO are empirically and conceptually similar to aspects of the H factor. As we have noted elsewhere (e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2013), the NEO-PI-R framework represents variance from HEXACO Honesty–Humility, Agreeableness, and Emotionality within its Agreeableness and Neuroticism factors, but omits much of the variance of those factors.