



The perceived attractiveness and traits of the Dark Triad: Narcissists are perceived as hot, Machiavellians and psychopaths not

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ABSTRACT

The current work investigated how a fictitious opposite-sex narcissist, Machiavellian, and psychopath are perceived in an experimental between subjects-design with three groups (total $N = 184$). Participants rated personality traits (Big Five and Agency/Communion) and different domains of interpersonal attraction (likeability, attractiveness, friend value, short-term mate value, long-term mate value) of the target persons. While all three target persons were not perceived particularly favorably by participants, the narcissist was consistently perceived more favorably than the Machiavellian and the psychopath who were perceived quite similarly to each other. It is discussed why narcissists may be judged more favorably and Machiavellians and psychopaths converge in people's lay perceptions.

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1. Introduction

Although individuals with high levels on the "Dark Triad"¹ (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) – the sub-clinical traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy – "get ahead" with self-beneficial and manipulative exploitation, their antagonistic behavioral style goes at the expense of "getting along": They frequently entail toxic and destructive trajectories (e.g., game-playing, social pain, fraud, delinquency; Jonason & Schmitt, 2012; Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Yet, driven "go-getter" people that do what it takes to climb the ladder in life may seem attractive despite their downsides which may leak out more and more after prolonged interactions (e.g., Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Paulhus, 1998). Popular literature and media is full of "anti-heroes" and "bad boys" who seem quite appealing and are worshipped (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012). But how exactly are narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths judged by people? The current work examines with an experimental design to what extent

opposite-sex "dark personalities" are appealing (i.e., likeable and attractive) and how they are judged in their personality traits of the Big Five and Agency/Communion.

1.1. The Dark Triad

Narcissists show (a) self-aggrandization, (b) seeking of attention and admiration, (c) vanity, (d) exhibitionism, (e) arrogance, (f) proneness towards power, prestige, status, and leadership, and (g) feelings of superiority and entitlement (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993, 2001; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988). *Machiavellians* show (a) cynical, pragmatic, cold, and misanthropic beliefs, (b) callous emotional detachment, (c) striving for agentic goals (money, power, and status), and (d) calculating, duplicitous, and exploitative manipulation tactics (Christie & Geis, 1970; Fehr, Samsom, & Paulhus, 1992; Jones & Paulhus, 2009; Rauthmann, 2012a; Rauthmann & Will, 2011; Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). *Psychopaths* show (a) cold affect, (b) interpersonal manipulation, (c) impulsivity and thrill-seeking, and (d) anti-social behaviors (Hare, 1985, 1991, 2003; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996; Salekin, Leistico, & Mullins-Nelson, 2006; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2003).

The moderately intercorrelated Dark Triad share similar (a) conceptualizations (e.g., focus on malevolence), (b) correlates (e.g., low agreeableness), (c) phenotypical behaviors (e.g., manipulation), and (d) trajectories (e.g., success in short-term mating) (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Paulhus &

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¹ The terms "dark person(ality)", "narcissist", "Machiavellian", and "psychopath" are not used as diagnostic or clinical terms that are indicative of a categorization, but only as abbreviations for people who score relatively high on respective scales of these traits.

Williams, 2002). These similarities among the Dark Triad traits may reflect an underlying fast life strategy (Jonason et al., 2012). Moreover, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are sometimes seen as only nuances of one underlying general dark personality factor and hence virtually indistinguishable (e.g., Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996; McHoskey, 1995, 2001; McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998) despite the fact that they also exhibit many differences (see, e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011; Rauthmann, 2011, 2012b; Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). Examining whether people judge narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths differently can elucidate to what extent lay people converge dark personalities in their social perceptions: Are they all the same or are there differences between (perceptions of) narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths?

1.2. Personality perceptions of dark personalities

According to Jones and Paulhus (2010), “Quadrant 2 of the interpersonal circumplex (i.e., high-agency low-communion) is inhabited by individuals variously characterized as arrogant, calculating, callous, and manipulative” (p. 250). However, there are probably differences in how narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths are judged although interpersonal perception studies on the full Dark Triad (not only one member) are scarce (cf. Rauthmann, 2012b). This makes it difficult to examine unique personality profiles of narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths. Moreover, peer-reports are seldom used to further validate dark personalities’ self-views. For example, Rauthmann (2012b) found in a naturalistic setting that dark personalities were perceived as disagreeable and somewhat agentic. The current study examines perceptions of narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths with an experimental design to elucidate more stringently and systematically how they are perceived in appeal and personality traits. Based on the literature examining associations among the Dark Triad and personality (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Rauthmann, 2012b) and the literature outlined above, we hypothesized that a narcissist would be perceived more favorably regarding personality (e.g., more agreeableness and conscientiousness) and thus differently than a Machiavellian and psychopath on personality dimensions, whereas the latter two would be perceived similarly or virtually identically.

1.3. Attractiveness of dark personalities

Narcissists have been found to be (a) popular and attractive (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Küfner, Nestler, & Back, in press), (b) attain status (Brunell et al., 2008; Deluga, 1997; Young & Pinsky, 2006), and (c) have success in short-term mating (Holtzman & Strube, 2010, 2011; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011; Jonason et al., 2009). This suggests that they could be somewhat desirable as friends and mates. Machiavellians show cold, aloof, and misanthropic behavior (Christie & Geis, 1970; Rauthmann & Will, 2011) and psychopaths callousness, an erratic lifestyle, and anti-social behaviors (Hare, 2003), which should make them undesirable to others as friends and mates. Machiavellianism and psychopathy are additionally believed to be virtually identical traits (e.g., Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996; McHoskey, 1995, 2001; McHoskey et al., 1998). This suggests that they have similar negative effects on liking and attraction at initial stages of acquaintanceship. Based on the study of Rauthmann and Kolar (2012) as well as the literature outlined above, we hypothesized that a narcissist would be seen as more appealing, likeable, and attractive than a Machiavellian and a psychopath, whereas the latter two would be perceived similarly or virtually identically.

2. The current work

Do narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths differ in how they are perceived by others regarding their personalities and likeability/attractiveness? This question is important for different reasons. First, misguided relationship choices may be explained. Relationship choice – who to date, mate, and relate with – is a fundamental choice with many consequences: A vibrant, driven, captivating, and “complex” person may seem interesting at first sight (see Back et al., 2010), but in the long haul such persons might not live up to what is expected from them, particularly in committed long-term relationships (e.g., Campbell & Campbell, 2009). Thus, what seemed initially a good choice may later turn out to be a bad choice with many negative consequences (e.g., social pain, grief, low relationship satisfaction). Second, Rauthmann and Kolar (2012) investigated people’s perceptions of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy as traits and found that narcissism was judged differently than Machiavellianism and psychopathy. The former was judged more positively than the latter two which were judged quite similarly as unfavorable. However, it remains unclear how people with dark traits (not dark traits per se) are perceived. People’s social cognition may drive their behavior, and a positive view of dark personalities could explain why they are successful in short-term mating (e.g., Jonason et al., 2009) and other contexts (e.g., Deluga, 1997).

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Students from an undergraduate psychology seminar were instructed to gather data on at least 10 non-university people (five women, five men). The acquired participants did not receive any form of compensation. Data from $N = 201$ participants (95 female, 90 male; 16 unidentified; mean age = 23.78 years, $SD = 5.77$, range: 17–54) were obtained on paper–pencil measures. Because of missing values, $N = 184$ (95 women, 89 men) remained for multivariate analyses.

3.2. Procedure

To clearly investigate perceptions of narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths, an experimental design was employed varying a fictitious opposite-sex target person’s trait. In the first condition ($n = 60$) participants obtained information about a bogus opposite-sex person scoring highly on four items of a narcissism scale (i.e., 3 and 4 on a scale ranging from 0 to 4), in the second condition ($n = 64$) about someone scoring highly on four items of a Machiavellianism scale, and in the third condition ($n = 60$) about someone scoring highly on four items of a psychopathy scale. Participants then indicated their liking/attraction for the bogus persons and rated their personality on the Big Five and Agency/Communion. The vignette scales were derived from Jonason and Webster’s (2010) Dirty Dozen (narcissism: e.g., I tend to want others to admire me; Machiavellianism: e.g., I tend to manipulate others to get my way; psychopathy: e.g., I tend to lack remorse). Perceptions can thus be investigated as a function of the manipulated trait vignette.

3.3. Measures

The vignette person’s likeability (“How likeable is this person?”), friend value (“How much would you like this person as a platonic friend?”), attractiveness (“How attractive do you find this person?”), short-term mate value (“How much would you like this

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