



The Dark Triad and animal cruelty: Dark personalities, dark attitudes, and dark behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Research examining the interpersonal interactions of those high on the Dark Triad has proliferated in recent years. Extant research, however, has not examined other types of relationships such as attitudes and behaviors towards animals. Further, there has been limited research examining the associations between personality and attitudes and behaviors towards animals generally. In this study, participants ($N = 227$) completed an online survey measuring the Dark Triad, attitudes towards animals, and acts of animal cruelty. The results revealed that individuals with higher levels of the Dark Triad demonstrated less positive attitudes towards animals and reported engaging in more acts of animal cruelty. Age and sex were found to be significant predictors of less positive attitudes and behaviors towards animals, independent of the Dark Triad. These results suggest that those callous and manipulative behaviors and attitudes that have come to be associated with the Dark Triad are not just limited to human-to-human interactions, but are also consistent across other interactions.

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1. Introduction

Since the initial publication on the Dark Triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), there has been an ever expanding literature regarding the behaviors and attitudes associated with this cluster of dark personalities. Life history theory (Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005)—an evolutionary psychology theory that proposes that individual differences are solutions to adaptive problems as a reaction to various environmental constraints—has been used as a framework to account for the emergence and survival of these dark personalities (e.g., Jonason & Webster, 2012). To date the focus of these adaptive problems have been limited to human-to-human interactions, for example, that high levels of the Dark Triad are associated with manipulation within the workplace (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012), substance use (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010), detached love styles (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010), dark humor (Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010), and impulsivity and sensation seeking (Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013).

However, humans co-evolved with some animals and domesticating stock and using dogs for hunting has been suggested to be one of the fundamental turning points in our evolutionary history

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(Schleidt & Shalter, 2003), vastly increasing our chances of long-term survival. The domestication of stock, using animals to help with work (e.g., plowing fields), hunting, and as companion “pets” is a long-term investment, suggesting a slow life strategy. In modern society, animals hold an important role, with companion animals playing a formative aspect in childhood for the majority of Australians (Australian Companion Animal Council, 2010), Americans (American Pet Products Association, 2012), and British (Pet Food Manufacturers Association, 2010). It is plausible then that if individuals high on the Dark Triad tend to employ a fast life history strategy (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012) then they would demonstrate the same antisocial attitudes, behaviors, and lack of empathy towards animals as they do towards their own species. In short, individuals high on the Dark Triad should be equally callous and manipulative towards animals as they are towards humans.

1.1. Animal cruelty

For many, pets are members of the family and yet research suggests experiences of deliberate animal cruelty, both witnessed and perpetrated, are relatively common. For example, nearly 2% of the approximately 43,000 adult participants interviewed for a US based national epidemiologic study self-identified as engaging in animal cruelty at some point in their lives (Vaughn et al., 2009). In comparison, up to 50% of adolescents in an Italian sample

(Baldry, 2003; Baldry, 2004), and 21% of a similarly aged Australian sample (Gullone & Robertson, 2008) had engaged in instances of animal cruelty. Thus, while animal cruelty is common, age appears to be an important factor, with higher rates reported in younger populations. Interestingly, younger populations also appear to have higher rates of the Dark Triad (e.g., Jonason, Slomski, et al., 2012).

Cruelty to animals is one of a range of behaviors that are associated with later adulthood antisocial behavior (e.g., Henry, 2004). Research investigating the links between acts of deliberate harm to animals, individual pathology, and related risk for antisocial and/or violent behavior has increased over the past few decades (e.g., Tallichet, Hensley, O'Bryan, & Hassel, 2005). Early attempts to determine a predictive relation between the Macdonald triad (animal cruelty, fire setting, and nocturnal enuresis) and risk for adulthood aggression and criminality have foundered (Taylor & Signal, 2008). However, several researchers have reported associations between animal cruelty and juvenile fire setting (e.g., Slavkin, 2001), with these associations often moderated by sex (higher prevalence in boys), family dysfunction, and/or personality factors. In general, attention has focused on the utility of intentional animal cruelty as a “red flag” indicator for the propensity to engage in violent antisocial behaviors including intimate partner abuse (Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008), intra-familial violence (Khan & Cooke, 2008), sexual assault (Simons, Wurtele, & Durham, 2008), and bullying (Gullone & Robertson, 2008).

Although a large amount of research exists examining demographic variables that may influence attitudes towards animals such as sex (Herzog, 2007) and occupation (Signal & Taylor, 2006), personality variables that may influence attitudes towards, and treatment of, animals are not well quantified (Oleson & Henry, 2009). Thus, it is essential to broaden the scope of animal cruelty research to consider other known, specifically personality-based, risk factors for antisocial behavior.

To date, the limited research examining the associations between personality and attitudes to animals (ATA) have produced mixed results. For example, high levels of sensitivity and imaginativeness have been associated with pro-animal welfare attitudes (Matthews & Herzog, 1997), higher levels of agreeableness, lower levels of extraversion and narcissism are associated with the opposition to the use of animals in research (Furnham, McManus, & Scott, 2003; Sharp, Wuensch, Eppler, & Harju, 2006), and higher levels of hostility and need for control/power are associated with poor attitudes to animals for men (Oleson & Henry, 2009).

In the current study, we extend the growing literature on the Dark Triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy combining this with the increasing literature on animal cruelty with a focus on simultaneously filling gaps in both bodies of literature by examining the associations between these dark personality traits and attitudes and behaviors towards animals. Specifically, we predict that those high on the Dark Triad will have less positive attitudes towards animals and report engaging in more acts of animal cruelty. A secondary aim of this study, given the recent controversy in the literature regarding the unique contributions of each of the three traits versus the latent Dark Triad construct (see Jonason, Kavanagh, Webster, & Fitzgerald, 2011; Jones & Figueredo, 2012; for a full discussion) is to compare the three traits to the latent construct within the above predictions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred and sixty-one participants (34 males, 227 females) initially started the online survey; however, 34 participants

did not complete all of the measures. Consequently, a reduced sample of 22 men ($M_{Age} = 29.50$, $SD_{Age} = 11.62$) and 205 women ($M_{Age} = 30.80$, $SD_{Age} = 11.73$) were used in the final analyses. The majority of the sample (94%) were Australian, 2% British, and the remaining 1% were Canadian, New Zealander, American, or Dutch.

Participant recruitment was conducted via posting a link to the online survey on email distribution lists and Facebook pages to which the researchers had access. A snowballing method was then utilized with participants forwarding the survey link to their respective networks. After initially accessing the online survey, participants completed an informed consent process. At the completion of the survey, participants were presented with a debriefing page and thanked.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Psychopathy

Psychopathy was measured with the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (SRP-III; Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, 2010). Participants rated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) on 31 statements designed to assess subclinical psychopathy. The scale had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$), thus the items were averaged to produce an index of psychopathy, with higher scores indicative of higher levels of psychopathy (Table 1).

2.2.2. Narcissism

Narcissism was measured with an adapted version of the NPI-16 (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). This was adapted by employing a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) as opposed to the traditional forced choice version, using only the positive valenced (narcissistic response) items. The scale had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$), with the items therefore averaged to form an index of narcissism, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of the trait (Table 1).

2.2.3. Machiavellianism

The MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970) was used to assess Machiavellianism. Participants rated the level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) on 20 statements designed to assess Machiavellianism. The scale demonstrated reasonable internal consistency ($\alpha = .75$) with the items therefore averaged to form an index of Machiavellianism, with higher scores indicating higher levels of this trait (Table 1).

2.2.4. Dark Triad composite

Consistent with previous research (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010) the Dark Triad measures were treated as a composite measure with the index scores on each measure (SRP-III-A, NPI-16, MACH-IV) first standardized. All the measures significantly correlated with each other ($r_s > .20$, $p_s < .01$; Table 1) and averaged to form a composite Dark Triad score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of this composite trait ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.76$, range: -1.79 to 2.41). Further, the three measures all loaded well ($>.67$) on a single factor accounting for 59% of the variance (eigenvalue = 1.76).

2.2.5. Attitudes towards animals

To assess participants' attitudes towards animals the 26-item Attitudes Towards the Treatment of Animals Scale (ATTAS; Henry, 2004) was used. Participants rated the extent to which they would be bothered (1 = *not at all bothered*; 5 = *bothered a lot*) to think about someone engaging in various acts of behavior towards animals (e.g., “intentionally killing a wild animal while hunting” through to “having sexual contact with an animal”). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$) with the items therefore averaged to form an index of ATA with lower scores indicating less positive attitudes ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.58$).

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