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The influence of the Dark Triad on various aspects of life – a review

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Abstract

Introduction: The Dark Triad is a construct devised by Paulhus and Williams in 2002. It comprises of three personality disorders: Narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, that are believed to be debilitating both to people exhibiting these traits and their social environment.

Aim of the Study: The aim of the study was to collect and analyse current literature regarding the Dark Triad and the influence of its components on different areas of functioning.

Methods and Materials: Extensive research was conducted using PubMed and Google Scholar, with the primary focus on literature from the past 5 years. These databases were searched using “the Dark Triad” and its

components names as entries to gather articles. Additionally, references from selected articles were included in the analysis.

Results: Our article showed that the components of the Dark Triad influence many areas of functioning, although this influence is not always negative.

Having all the traits of the Dark Triad is more likely to induce immoral behaviour than having the individual traits in isolation. Thus, further research of the Dark Triad is needed, especially regarding different facets of its components. Devising more in-depth questionnaires that would cover all sub-divisions of the Dark Triad components would largely bolster the research in this field.

Keywords: psychology, the Dark Triad, Machiavellianism, Narcissism, psychopathy, personality

Introduction and Purpose of the Study

Malevolent tendencies and behaviours have been conceptualized as the Dark Triad of personality (Garcia & MacDonald, 2017), which is becoming an increasingly popular subject of research (Vize et al., 2018). The Dark Triad refers to a constellation of three conceptually distinct but empirically overlapping personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. (Hu & Lan, 2022) Common trait of the Dark Triad, in regard to Big Five, is disagreeableness. Most known means to measure Dark Triad components is with NPI questionnaire for narcissism, Mach-IV inventory for Machiavellianism and SPR III for psychopathy. (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) It is suggested that there is a lack of insight, (Maples-Keller & Miller, 2018) and the diversity of each trait leads to their aspects overlapping with each other, thus there are studies proposing alternative structures (Bader et al., 2023). For example, it has been discussed that grandiose narcissism and Machiavellianism could be subsumed under psychopathy, considering that megalomania and manipulateness are practically included in all conceptualizations of psychopathy (Bader et al., 2023). Theoretically, psychopathy and Machiavellianism seem to be relatively distinct - significant differences between these constructs rely on the association of psychopathy with impulsivity, while Machiavellianism is supposedly associated with even above-average control of impulsivity (Vize et al., 2018). A series of empirical studies have been conducted on "dark" traits, which are associated with ethical, moral, and socially aversive beliefs and

behaviors(Kaufman et al., 2019). It is crucial to decisively examine the similarities and differences of these traits with respect to each other (Bader et al., 2023). The aim of this study is to synthesize and summarize current state of knowledge regarding Dark Triad and influence which its components have on various aspects of life.

State of Knowledge

Psychopaths lack guilt(Brewer et al., 2021; Brunett & Oberle, 2022), which, along with empathy, influences the sense of responsibility for others, leading to immoral decisions and behaviours such as blaming the victim rather than the perpetrator of crimes(Brewer et al., 2021). They are characterized by superficial personal charm, high self-esteem, manipulative behaviour, seeking stimulation (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019), risk-taking propensity, impulsivity, decreased empathy and neuroticism (Wissing & Reinhard, 2019), and callous social attitudes (Jonason & Tome, 2019). They are rebellious and thrill-seeking (Bader et al., 2023). They have the ability to maintain calm and concentration in pressure or threatening situations, so they quickly recover from them. They show tolerance for unfamiliarity and danger (Bader et al., 2023). They are prone to exploitation and reinforcing their position through cruelty (Bader et al., 2023). People with high psychopathy are thought to be most prone to treacherous behaviours.(Paulhus & Williams, 2002) Their goal is immediate gratification, which is associated with insufficient behavioural restraint, as well as lack of planning and foresight (Bader et al., 2023). Research on psychopathy has been primarily conducted within forensic and clinical psychology, due to its strong associations with criminality and antisocial behaviour (Vize et al., 2018). Psychopathy can be divided into primary and secondary. Primary psychopathy is characterised by callousness, manipulateness and selfishness. Meanwhile, secondary psychopathy is linked to higher anxiety and neuroticism.(Levenson et al., 1995)

Narcissism is characterized by egotism, pride, and lack of empathy (Brunett & Oberle, 2022), high self-esteem (Bader et al., 2023), a strong sense of superiority, dominance (Karim, 2022; Wissing & Reinhard, 2019), arrogance, ambition, and the need for attention and admiration (Karim, 2022). Narcissists are cynical, arrogant, deceitful, and believe they deserve special treatment (Bader et al., 2023). Understanding the thoughts and feelings of others may be crucial for narcissists to satisfy their ego needs (Sariyska et al., 2019). Neuroticism in narcissists is associated with fragile and conditional self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, and experiencing shame (Bader et al., 2023). Narcissistic individuals enjoy being admired or evaluated based on their appearance (Shengbo et al., 2022). Narcissistic admiration is correlated with low anxiety and high ratings of their intelligence (Aghababaei et al., 2022).

Research on narcissism has identified two variants: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Vize et al., 2018). Grandiose narcissism is characterized by lack of humility and modesty and a sense of dominance, while vulnerable narcissism is associated with egotism, mistrust, and a need for attention and recognition (Vize et al., 2018). Research suggests that narcissism is the easiest to notice in others, compared to the other components of the Dark Triad (Lämmle et al., 2021).

Individuals exhibiting Machiavellian tendencies are characterized by instrumentalism and strategicness in interpersonal relationships (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019), cynicism (Karim, 2022), and lowered moral standards (Brunett & Oberle, 2022, 2022; Karim, 2022). They are considered adept manipulators and unscrupulous pragmatists (Bader et al., 2023; Brunett & Oberle, 2022; Karim, 2022; Vize et al., 2018). They engage in exploitative behaviours, distrust others, and strive for high socioeconomic status (Karim, 2022). They focus on their own benefits (Sariyska et al., 2019). Study performed by Monaghan et al. showed that Machiavellianism consists of two dimensions: views and tactics. (Monaghan et al., 2016)

Tendency for Addictions

Lack of inhibition of certain behaviours and impulsivity in psychopaths, or the need for stabilization of self-esteem in narcissists predispose to the development of addictions (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). Among the three personality traits within the dark triad spectrum, mainly narcissism and psychopathy are associated with substance use (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). Apart from substance-related behaviours, grandiose narcissism is associated with addictive use of social media, shopping addiction, workaholism, or gambling. Increased shame and impulsivity are associated with problematic alcohol use in vulnerable narcissists. Devaluation, or lack of interest in individuals who do not provide admiration to the narcissist and are therefore disappointing to them, has been found to be one of the strongest predictors (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). Machiavellianism is more common among individuals using cocaine and addicted to internet use (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). Among individuals in this spectrum, the need for planning and conscientiousness discourages substance use (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). Neuroimaging has shown overactivity of the striatum during amphetamine use and prediction of monetary reward in individuals with psychopathic traits, facilitating engagement in addictive behaviours in psychopaths (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). Impulsivity, or decreased behavioural control when assessing short-term benefits compared to long-term risks, leads to compulsive drug use (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019; Mayor et al., 2020). All three dimensions of the

Dark Triad are positively associated with the use of doping in sports, due to the tendency for competitiveness (Mayor et al., 2020; Van Hauwermeiren et al., 2023).

The Dark Triad and Gender

Evidence suggests differences between genders in personality aspects, which are more pronounced in cultures where socio-political gender equality exists. When examining Machiavellian personality, greater gender differences were found in Iceland, New Zealand, Denmark, and the Netherlands, while smaller differences occurred in communities in Malaysia, Ethiopia, South Korea, and Tanzania (Schmitt et al., 2017). Most studies have shown that men scored higher when assessed for dark triad traits (Jonason et al., 2020; Kaufman et al., 2019; Sariyska et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2017; Vaughan & Madigan, 2021). This is probably because women value values such as obedience, tradition, kindness, and security more (Jonason et al., 2020). Psychopathic traits facilitate men standing out, which is beneficial for evolution because it facilitates reproduction, so natural selection did not exclude them (Jonason et al., 2020).

Impact on Anxiety Disorders and Depression

Some personality disorders increase the likelihood of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, with one of the more serious being the Dark Triad (Shengbo et al., 2022). Research results have revealed that narcissism and psychopathy have a direct impact on the development of anxiety disorders, while Machiavellianism has no significant impact (Shengbo et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, narcissists were more confident and reported less anxiety, despite being alone and in danger, whereas narcissists with a tendency towards megalomania exhibited anxiety (Shengbo et al., 2022). This is because narcissists need social approval. It has been shown that psychopaths suffer from anxiety disorders, despite the widespread belief that psychopathy is associated with fearlessness (Shengbo et al., 2022). Demonstrating the relationship between the occurrence of depressive symptoms and psychopathy and Machiavellianism has proved problematic because research results have been diverse (Gómez-Leal et al., 2019). Narcissistic personality is associated with subjective well-being (Gómez-Leal et al., 2019) and psychological resilience (Papageorgiou et al., 2019), so focusing on it did not show a relationship with the occurrence of depression (Gómez-Leal et al., 2019). Narcissists have social support, which is considered a protective factor against mood disorders (Gómez-Leal et al., 2019). Machiavellianism is associated with anhedonia, emotional distance, and an inability to experience pleasure - symptoms often seen in depression (Gómez-Leal et al., 2019). Externalizing negative moods, such as anxiety or

depression, can result in antisocial and psychopathic behaviours (Gómez-Leal et al., 2019). On the other hand in a study performed by Zlatkovic et al. Machiavellianism turned out to play important role in resilience, especially in men. It may be due to reduction of reactivity to stress. Males with Machiavellian personality also tend to take proactive steps when faced with stress.(Zlatkovic et al., 2024)

Impact on Eating Disorders and Diet

Excessive focus on healthy eating and excessive concentration on food quality can actually be unhealthy, as is the case with orthorexia (Brunett & Oberle, 2022). This disorder is associated with a tendency towards narcissism, probably because individuals with orthorexia are extremely proud of their self-control and adherence to a diet they consider superior to the diets of others (Brunett & Oberle, 2022). Research has not shown whether this disorder is associated with Machiavellianism or psychopathy (Brunett & Oberle, 2022). The association between hierarchical justification of meat consumption ("Humans are at the top of the food chain and are meant to eat animals") and higher meat consumption and lower consumption of vegetarian dishes suggests a possible association between narcissism and omnivorism (Sariyska et al., 2019). A relationship has been shown between higher empathy and the use of a plant-based diet (Sariyska et al., 2019). Narcissism was positively associated with the consumption of fish and eggs, while Machiavellianism and psychopathy were positively associated with the consumption of pork (Sariyska et al., 2019). Dark Triad traits are associated with more frequent meat consumption and more negative attitudes towards animals, and psychopathy is additionally associated with behaviours exhibiting cruelty towards animals (Sariyska et al., 2019).

Interpersonal Relationships

Having Dark Triad traits is associated with a desire to be independent of others (Brunett & Oberle, 2022), dissatisfaction with being in a relationship (Brunett & Oberle, 2022), and even relationship violence (Jonason & Tome, 2019). Psychopaths are vile individuals, characterized by a lack of empathy, contempt, and a lack of close ties with others (Bader et al., 2023). Each trait in the Dark Triad predisposes to engaging in exploitative interpersonal behaviours, but motivations, behaviours, and tactics vary depending on the dominant personality (Jones & Paulhus, 2017). There is evidence that especially Machiavellianism and psychopathy are associated with fraud (Wissing & Reinhard, 2019), but when the risk of

punishment is very high, only psychopaths are inclined to it - psychopathy is the greatest predictor of dishonesty (Jones & Paulhus, 2017). In individuals with Machiavellian traits, it is usually ego depletion that prevents them from resisting temptations to such an extent that they may behave identically to psychopaths (Jones & Paulhus, 2017). Narcissists, on the other hand, tend to self-deceive (Jones & Paulhus, 2017; Wissing & Reinhard, 2019) - instead of gaining resources from others, their selfish motivation requires multiple confirmations of their intellectual superiority (Jones & Paulhus, 2017). A decrease in cortisol levels has been observed in men with Machiavellian traits and an increase in testosterone levels in narcissists and psychopaths during fraud (Wissing & Reinhard, 2019). Recently, it has been observed that individuals with the dark triad have problems adhering to government regulations (Shengbo et al., 2022) - Machiavellianism derives its name from Niccolo Machiavelli, who described how to maintain political power using various tactics (Vize et al., 2018). Psychopathic and Machiavellian personalities have higher tendencies towards loneliness than narcissistic types (Shengbo et al., 2022). Social isolation may lead to more aggression in psychopathic individuals than in those who do not exhibit such traits (Sariyska et al., 2019; Shengbo et al., 2022). Studying the relationship between the Dark Triad and the mental health of adolescents is essential because high school students face significant socio-emotional changes and academic pressure, which can reinforce "dark" traits (Hu & Lan, 2022). Students with Machiavellian and psychopathic traits show a stronger relationship with adverse psychosocial outcomes than those with a tendency towards narcissism (Aghababaei et al., 2022; Hu & Lan, 2022). Compared to narcissism, these traits have a negative impact on subjective well-being (Aghababaei et al., 2022; Hu & Lan, 2022; Limone et al., 2020). People high on the spectrum demonstrate assertiveness, competitiveness, courage, and mastery in achieving goals, being admired and respected, but not necessarily liked by others (Vaughan & Madigan, 2021). They are inclined to consider gains and losses even in situations signaling danger to others (Maples-Keller & Miller, 2018).

Workplace

It has been shown that hiding and hoarding knowledge is common among academic workers. This behaviour is undesirable in the workplace, likely stemming from possessing personality traits characteristic of the Dark Triad, such as a tendency for manipulation, aggression, or exploitation (Karim, 2022). Individuals with such traits feel a sense of exclusivity and control over the dissemination of knowledge among coworkers, which stems from egocentrism. (Karim, 2022) They typically lack emotional engagement in others' affairs, are

neurotic, and exhibit low conscientiousness, which translates into their involvement(Aghababaei et al., 2022). Dark personalities tend to disregard social norms and obligations, thus ignoring coworkers' requests(Karim, 2022; Mayor et al., 2020). Often, their behaviours in the workplace result in unintended consequences(Jonason & Tome, 2019; Vaughan & Madigan, 2021). Such individuals have certain beliefs and expectations regarding their workplace and status, exhibiting a continuous need for power and attention (Karim, 2022; Mayor et al., 2020). Agreeableness, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are the traits that have a closest link to interpersonal deviance, whereas conscientiousness, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are related to committing an organizational deviance.(Ellen et al., 2021) Those with more Machiavellian traits resort to deception to advance(Shengbo et al., 2022). Studies have shown that they may engage in various forms of organizational involvement, even if not required, which forms the basis of positive workplace behaviour. However, this seems to be merely a means to an end(Aghababaei et al., 2022). The greatest successes seem to occur in unstructured environments, where there is greater freedom to manipulate others(Onley et al., 2013). Machiavellianism can aid in creating a favourable first impression and achieving a good reputation. However, in the longer term, cynicism and manipulation become apparent(Vaughan & Madigan, 2021). Psychopaths' tendency to take risks may be advantageous in competitive work environments where quick decision-making is essential(Onley et al., 2013). Individuals working in competitive climates may be more prone to using pharmacological cognitive-enhancing drugs(Mayor et al., 2020). It has been found that Dark Triad traits are prevalent among athletes. These traits make individual athletes achieve higher results than those engaging in team sports. The inclination to disregard others' emotions facilitates achieving personal goals(Vaughan & Madigan, 2021). Greater mental resilience(Onley et al., 2013), ability to perform under pressure, and excellent concentration also play a role(Vaughan & Madigan, 2021). Narcissism has been found to play the most significant role in this regard, as high sports performance is an opportunity for narcissists to self-improve and feel glory. Machiavellianism may be beneficial for team leaders(Vaughan & Madigan, 2021).

Aspect of Happiness

What makes people happy depends on their personality. The sense of happiness acts as feedback, serving as a reward for achieving life goals(Jonason & Tome, 2019). The Dark Triad has been negatively associated with life satisfaction(Kaufman et al., 2019). Studies have shown that psychopaths are less happy during everyday tasks(Jonason & Tome, 2019). Their

antisocial behaviour and propensity for risk-taking may explain why doing prosocial things and caring for family do not affect their sense of happiness. Narcissists, on the other hand, attach importance to engaging in prosocial actions and ensuring personal safety. Unlike psychopathy, Machiavellianism is associated with experiencing happiness stemming from meeting long-term goals, similar to narcissism's sense of security. Dark Triad traits are associated with a dissolute style of associating and a lack of motivation to avoid diseases. Simply imagining gaining a specific status, partner, or power is a source of happiness for such individuals (Jonason & Tome, 2019). People with high levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy seek happiness, but they fear losing control over this state (Aghababaei et al., 2022). In meta-analysis performed by Blasco-Belled et al. grandiose narcissism was correlated with better subjective well-being, whereas vulnerable narcissism was characterised by lower subjective and psychological well-being and negative affect. When investigating facets of narcissism, agentic and neurotic narcissisms were similar to respective dimensions of narcissism, but antagonistic narcissism seemed to have no influence on well-being. In case of psychopathy and Machiavellianism, they found negative correlation with both subjective and psychological well-being and link with negative affect. In depth analysis of psychopathy showed that general trend was consistent with findings regarding disinhibition, but antagonism was only related to negative affect and not at all to well-being. (Blasco-Belled et al., 2024) However, the findings are inconsistent because the sense of happiness is individual and may be more related to life events than disposition (Jonason & Tome, 2019).

Summary

The characteristics of the Dark Triad constitute related but distinct personality traits, each associated with emotional coldness, exploiting others, lack of empathy (Brewer et al., 2021), deceitfulness (Aghababaei et al., 2022), high levels of alexithymia (Sariyska et al., 2019), and utilitarian moral judgment (Kaufman et al., 2019). It was found that having these traits is correlated with being younger and male (Kaufman et al., 2019). Studies suggest that having all these traits inclines one towards immoral behaviors more than having individual traits separately (Brewer et al., 2021). Dark Triad traits are associated with negative psychosocial outcomes (Aghababaei et al., 2022) and having irrational expectations and beliefs, leading to selfish behaviors and disregard for coworkers (Karim, 2022). Difficulty in maintaining interpersonal relationships has also been demonstrated (Vaughan & Madigan, 2021). Narcissism is characterized by higher levels of extraversion and conscientiousness and lower levels of aggression compared to Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Vize et al., 2018). The

lack of emotional reactions and empathy, for example in psychopaths, predisposes them to anxiety and depression(Shengbo et al., 2022), which may seem counterintuitive. The results show that identifying narcissists is easier than individuals with Machiavellian or psychopathic traits because the "halo effect" works in their case(Lämmle et al., 2021). Perceiving the dark character as a complex, dynamic adaptive system suggests that the individual adapts to the environment(Garcia & MacDonald, 2017). Although there is an infinite number of likely combinations of "dark" character traits theoretically, there should be a small number of more commonly observed patterns(Garcia & MacDonald, 2017).

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