Toward a Taxonomy of Dark Personalities

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Abstract

The term *dark personalities* refers to a set of socially aversive traits in the subclinical range. Not extreme enough to invite clinical or forensic attention, they can get along (even flourish) in everyday work settings, scholastic settings, and the broader community. Along with my research group, I have studied a constellation of these personalities— Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism—under the label "Dark Tetrad." We have argued that, because of their overlap, these four traits should be studied in concert. Recently developed inventories now facilitate identification of the unique contributions of each trait. The present review highlights key advances and controversies emerging from work on these malevolent, yet fascinating, characters.

The so-called *devil effect* leads people to believe that folks who are undesirable in one way are likely undesirable in all ways (Thorndike, 1920). In reality, personalities can be socially aversive in a variety of distinct ways (Hogan & Hogan, 1997; Kowalski, 2001; Ziegler-Hill & Marcus, in press). My students and I have dedicated much effort toward differentiating and organizing an array of so-called *dark personalities*—those characterized by socially offensive traits falling in the normal or "everyday" range. Rather than being incarcerated or under clinical supervision, such individuals manage to survive, and even flourish, in everyday society.

Our original article on dark personalities (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) has garnered wide attention, with the number of citations now exceeding 700—and accelerating. At this point, it is time to update the wider community on the state of the topic, including our[1] current position on key issues.

In our initial effort to taxonomize socially aversive personalities, we found that three of them were prominent in both the theoretical and empirical literatures. This *Dark Triad* consists of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and (subclinical) psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Recently, a fourth trait has been added to that roster— namely, "everyday sadism." Hence the new moniker, *Dark Tetrad* (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013; Chabrol, Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009).

The studies emanating from this taxonomy include several dozen confirming the ability of questionnaire measures to uniquely predict concrete laboratory behaviors as well as real-world outcomes (for a full review, see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). The present report summarizes our efforts to organize the gamut of dark personalities, updates key developments, and highlights some of the more controversial issues.

Profiling the Players

First, it is necessary to flesh out the characters of those with dark traits. Readers are likely to have encountered all four in everyday life. Narcissists[2] are grandiose self-promoters who continually crave attention (see Campbell & Miller, 2011): You have undoubtedly been annoyed by these tiresome braggarts. Machiavellians are master manipulators (see review by Jones & Paulhus, 2011): At least one of them has cheated you out of something valuable—a fact that you may not have realized until it was too late. An everyday sadist has tried to hurt you, verbally or physically, for pure enjoyment (Buckels et al., 2013): Workplace bullies are classic examples—as are trolls on the Internet (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014). Arguably the most malevolent, a psychopath may have

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Table 1. Key Features of the Dark Tetrad of Personalities

Feature	Narcissism	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy	Sadism
Callousness	++	++	++	++
Impulsivity	+		++	
Manipulation	+	++	++	
Criminality		Only white-collar	++	
Grandiosity	++		+	
Enjoyment of cruelty				++

Note: A double plus sign indicates high levels of a given trait (top quintile) relative to the average population-wide level. A single plus sign indicates slightly elevated levels (top tertile). A blank entry indicates average levels of a trait.

caused you serious harm in an impulsive fit of callous thrill-seeking (Hare & Neumann, 2008). For reviews on the subclinical variant, see Lebreton, Binning, and Adorno (2006) or Hall and Benning (2006).

Clearly, these brief profiles point to four rather different personalities. Nonetheless, they overlap both conceptually and empirically. In fact, some researchers have argued that these constructs are indistinguishable within the normal range of personality (Jonason, Li, Schmitt, & Webster, 2008; McHoskey, Worzel, & Syzarto, 1998). From seminal writings as well as empirical patterns, we have argued for the importance of differentiating these four personalities (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). Table 1 presents a point-by-point summary of their profiles. The cardinal features of each member are indicated with double plus signs. Note that the one feature shared by all four is callousness, that is, a deficit in empathy.

Our perspective

Initially, our concerns centered on the consequences of failing to differentiate among the dark personalities (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). A researcher devoted to studying one of them may discover, perhaps too late, that some fascinating correlate is actually attributable to another variable in the tetrad family. This possibility is far from remote given the consistent positive intercorrelations among standard measures of dark traits (Jonason et al., 2008; McHoskey et al., 1998). In the extensive theoretical writings on these concepts, we saw signs of conceptual redundancy and confusion (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). This confusion has ensued, at least in part, from the phenomenon of *construct creep*: Writers who restrict their focus to one dark personality inevitably expand its coverage (as detailed in Furnham et al., 2013). In sum, the challenge before us was to reconcile the tension between the distinctiveness and overlap of dark-personality members.

In our view, the common feature that explains both the theoretical and empirical overlap is callousness—that is, lack of empathy toward others. Because each has unique features, however, this callousness plays out rather differently in the four characters. In their quest for public admiration, narcissists lack empathy for those they step on. The strategic Machiavellian takes care while taking advantage: Exemplified in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the malicious stockbroker can fleece the pockets of investors while judiciously avoiding detection. By contrast, psychopaths impulsively grab what they want, caring little if others get hurt. Finally, the everyday sadist actually seeks out opportunities to observe or even induce suffering in other people.

These distinctions have resonated with other researchers and have generated a wealth of research contrasting two or more of these characters. Below, we address key issues that have emerged from this research.

Key Issues—and the Empirical Data

Unitary or multidimensional?

Correlations among Dark Tetrad measures are always positive, ranging from .20 to .60. Explanations for this positive manifold of negative traits vary, but they suggest a common component that may have psychological significance in its own right. As noted earlier, our interpretation of that component is a tendency to be callous about the welfare of others (Jones & Figueredo, 2013). That callousness sanctions a wide array of interpersonal offenses without the consequences of shame or guilt. (Other reasonable interpretations of the overlap have been offered; see Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006, and Jonason et al., 2008.)

At a higher-order level, the six-factor HEXACO model may prove to be key. Unlike the complex patterns emerging from Big Five studies (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), correlations with the HEXACO traits implicate Factor 6, that is, Honesty-Humility. Low scores on this factor link together all members of the triad at the levels of self-perception and other perception (Ashton & Lee, 2001). Yet to be determined is whether this factor subsumes our fourth member, everyday sadism.

Impediments to dark-personality research

Whereas the study of prosocial behavior has few ethical constraints, purposeful elicitation of antisocial behaviors is fraught with ethical complexities. Researchers must

find adroit methods to minimize any harmful effects on participants. In our research on sadism, for example, we asked participants to harm bugs instead of other people. Even then, the act of "bug crunching" was an illusion: No bugs were actually harmed (Buckels et al., 2013). By couching the debriefing in terms of recent bedbug infestations, we were able to avoid any possible psychological repercussions among those participants who chose to kill bugs.

A second major impediment has been the excessive time and space required to administer measures of multiple dark personalities. Fortunately, two multivariate inventories are now available to facilitate simultaneous comparisons. One is the Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Second is the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Both inventories permit the efficient differentiation of unique contributions in predicting the same criterion variable. Although results with the two inventories are often similar, the validity of the Short Dark Triad benefits from its use of 27 items instead of 12 (Maples, Lamkin, & Miller, 2014). Also, intercorrelations among the subscales are somewhat lower with the Short Dark Triad. On the other hand, the Dirty Dozen inventory takes less time to administer. A questionnaire battery tapping all four Dark Tetrad variables is now under development (see Buckels et al., 2013; Paulhus & Jones, in press).

Links with broader models of personality

One form of construct validation involved determining where dark personalities lie within standard structural models of personality space. With regard to the Big Five traits, dark personalities score low on agreeableness and conscientiousness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). In the interpersonal circumplex, they fall in Quadrant II, that is, high agency and low communion (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). As succinctly summarized by Hogan (2007), dark personalities succeed in getting ahead but fail at getting along. As noted earlier, the broadest link is with the Honesty-Humility factor of the HEXACO model (Ashton & Lee, 2001).

Links with clinical disorders

The most far-reaching potential for our research is the integration of so-called "normal" personality constructs (based on community, student, and worker samples) with clinical constructs (based on cases requiring forensic or psychological intervention). The contemporary shift away from categorical conceptions (e.g., psychopathic or not) to a more dimensional one is consistent with our approach (e.g., psychopathy falls on a continuum). Following Krueger (2005) and others, we anticipate an eventual integration of the clinical conceptions with the subclinical conceptions of personality disorders.

Are dark personalities clinically disturbed? Across the board, the evidence fails to support that notion (Krupp, Sewall, Lalumiere, Sheriff, & Harris, 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Yes, they can be aggressive (Jones & Paulhus, 2010) and duplicitous (Jones, 2013). Unless one uses social malevolence as a criterion, however, Dark Tetrad traits should not be considered inherently psychopathological.

Trade-offs

In fact, evidence abounds that the behavior of dark personalities can be adaptive in limited contexts (*dark niches*). For example, narcissists are found appealing in brief interactions such as job interviews (Paulhus, Westlake, Calvez, & Harms, 2013) and first dates (Dufner, Rauthmann, Czarna, & Denissen, 2013). With continued interactions, however, they become more and more disliked (Paulhus, 1998). Even psychopaths may flourish in the right cultural context—for example, in street gangs. The ideal niche for everyday sadists is in organizations that require enforcers—that is, individuals hired to punish others.

Reflecting on the inevitable trade-offs involved in selecting job applicants, Kets de Vries (1999) asked whether it is preferable to hire a "live volcano" or a "dead fish." More generally, it might be more enjoyable to spend time with one of the tetrad than a more tedious personality—an awkward, socially phobic alexithymic, perhaps? At least the tetrad members are socially engaged.

Origins: genetic and environmental

Behavioral-genetics studies have confirmed a substantial genetic contribution to individual differences in each of the Dark Triad members (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). That same research has distinguished among the triad members by demonstrating differential environmental contributions. Specifically, only Machiavellianism showed an environmental contribution. Perhaps that proclivity is nurtured by parental or peer encouragement and is accordingly more susceptible to intervention.

The evolutionary perspective suggests some sort of reproductive advantage for dark personalities (Mealey, 1995). One possibility is that dark personalities confer advantages in the context of a short-term mating strategy (Jonason et al., 2008) consistent with a fast life history (Figueredo & Wolf, 2009). The observed distinctions among dark personalities, however, suggest the existence of distinct dark niches: These are more specific paths to reproductive success. For example, the short-term mating strategy is exploited by psychopaths but not by Machiavellians (Jones & Weiser, 2014).

This dark-niche notion accounts for the variation in adaptiveness outlined in the previous section. Within its niche, each dark personality thrives. Outside of this niche, the typical behavior of a dark personality may incur serious negative consequences.

Circumscribing the constellation

A recurring issue concerns the comprehensiveness of our four-variable constellation. The annoying behaviors detailed in Kowalski (2001) raise other possibilities. For example, the constant complaining of the neurotic can be exasperating; so is the irresponsibility of the individual low in conscientiousness. The impetuous individual can undermine the productivity of an entire work group. To warrant membership in the dark constellation, however, we maintain that candidates must share the callousness that unites the others (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). To emphasize that criterion, our restricted set might be called the *callous constellation*.

Although the unmitigated agency of dark personalities has obvious social consequences, so does the extremity of communal narcissists (Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, & Maio, 2012). These sanctimonious individuals irritate others with claims of moral superiority. Other candidates for consideration in the callous constellation include borderline personality disorder and social dominance orientation.

Then again, there are undesirable personalities of an entirely different nature. Consider those with an unhealthy *deficiency* in agency—for example, excessive passivity. The Dark Tetrad members have no problem in that respect: They are all runaway agentics.

Applications: Present and Future

Research on the Dark Triad in the workplace is well underway (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012; Wu & Lebreton, 2011). Typical are individuals whose agentic side facilitates their getting hired. Downstream, however, they exhibit counterproductive behaviors that might have been anticipated through proper screening. Among the most important workplace applications is the detection of toxic leaders before they can wreak havoc (Harms, Spain, & Hanna, 2012; Hogan, 2007; O'Boyle et al., 2012).

In some occupations, actual physical harm or criminality may result from the inadvertent hiring of dark personalities. Obvious candidates are police officers and front-line military personnel. By dint of their work mandate, these individuals have abundant opportunities to harm others with little fear of consequences. Prescreening with one of the inventories described earlier would pay off by preventing inappropriate individuals from being installed in positions where they could cause serious damage.

Among students, the Dark Tetrad model has already proved useful in investigating cheating at the college level (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010) and delinquency at the high school level (Chabrol et al., 2009). To date, no research is available on samples under age 15.

One could argue that even more damage is wreaked by dark personalities who perpetrate white-collar crime. Again, distinctions realized from joint measurement of the tetrad have proved valuable (Jones, Mathieu, Neumann, Babiak, & Hare, 2013). Although direct research on this topic is difficult, it seems clear that malevolent stockbrokers such as Bernie Madoff do not qualify as psychopaths: They are corporate Machiavellians who use deliberate, strategic procedures for exploiting others.[3] A genuine psychopath, even at the subclinical level, lacks the self-control to orchestrate the schemes of a shrewd stockbroker. Rather than lumping them together, we strongly advise large organizations to differentiate the four dark personalities in their hiring procedures.

Presumably, some tension will continue between researchers seeking to further subdivide dark constructs (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009; Rauthmann, 2012) and researchers who focus on what unifies them. From our point of view, the greater concern is the excessive overlap due to construct creep. We also expect that debate will continue over the appropriateness of controlling overlap.

Wrap-Up

Our work on the "dark side" stands in stark contrast to the popular work on positive personality traits. In our view, dark personalities are more fascinating than shiny, happy folks. We would also argue for the greater importance of our preference: There is a more pressing need to understand these dark characters. Nonetheless, one intriguing possibility for future research would involve measuring both positive and dark personality traits in the same people. We suspect that they are not polar opposites.

Why the accelerated interest in dark personalities? Most important, we believe, is the advent of new Dark Triad inventories designed to facilitate efficient research. These can be augmented with new measures of everyday sadism to cover the full tetrad. Traditional measures were lengthy and encouraged researchers to focus on just one variable. At last, researchers can efficiently tackle the challenging questions and controversies detailed above.

Recommended Reading

Campbell, W. K., & Miller, J. D. (2011). (See References). The definitive handbook on narcissism, both clinical and subclinical.

Furnham, A., Richards, S. C., & Paulhus, D. L. (2013). (See References). The most thorough review on the Dark Triad.

Lebreton, J. M., Binning, J. F., & Adorno, A. J. (2006). (See References). An exploration of noncriminal psychopathy in the community.

Ziegler-Hill, V., & Marcus, D. K. (in press). (See References). The most comprehensive coverage of dark personalities, with contributions from a variety of writers.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Plural pronouns are used to honor the contributions of my students. See the Acknowledgements.
2. My use of apparently categorical terms such as *psychopath* is meant to simplify communication rather than imply sharp boundaries for these constructs. In fact, we have argued that the Dark Triad variables are dimensional, not categorical (Jones & Paulhus, 2011).
3. Note that willingness to manipulate is not equivalent to skill in manipulating (O'Boyle et al., 2012).

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