



The Dark Triad of personality and unethical behavior at different times of day



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ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad of personality – narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy – is characterized by callous manipulation and social exploitation. Thus, dark personalities should be more prone to unethical behavior. Unethical behavior has been shown to vary during the course of the day with individuals displaying lower morality in the evening (Morning Morality Effect, MME). Hence, the present study investigated the association between the Dark Triad and unethical behavior as a function of time of day in an experimental design. Participants ($N = 195$) completed the study either in the morning or in the evening. In one task, participants had the choice to cheat on a fictitious partner for monetary benefit at the partner's expense. In a second task, they had the opportunity to lie about their performance for personal gain. Machiavellianism scores positively predicted unethical behavior in the first task. In the second task, psychopathy scores positively predicted lying. Neither could the MME be replicated, nor did time of day moderate the influence of the Dark Triad on unethical behavior. Thus, the present study indicates that the dark traits are differentially related to aspects of unethical behavior, such that Machiavellians display a preference for complex deception, while psychopaths engage in impulsive cheating.

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1.1. Introduction

The Dark Triad of personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) comprises three socially aversive and malevolent personality traits, namely narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and superiority (Raskin & Hall, 1979), Machiavellianism can be described as a manipulative personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and individuals with psychopathic traits have high sensation seeking and impulsivity along with callous affect and low empathy (Hare, 1985). Although offensive, the Dark Triad traits do not represent pathological concepts per se. Instead, individuals with dark personalities may very well be within the normal range of functioning (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013).

The three traits have distinct theoretical origins. Narcissism and psychopathy were originally proposed to represent mental disorders, which found their way into mainstream personality research by the development of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI, Raskin & Hall, 1979) and the Self-Report Psychopathy (SRP) scale (Hare, 1985), respectively. The concept of Machiavellianism has a philosophical background as it is named for Niccolò Machiavelli, a politician and philosopher in the Florentine Republic around 1500. Machiavellianism emerged as a personality trait through the work of Christie and Geis

(1970), who delineated the Mach-IV as a measure of Machiavellianism. Despite their different etiologies, these personalities share common features, for example disagreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), manipulation and callousness (Jones & Figueredo, 2013), and social exploitation (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010). However, they are not equivalent, but rather “overlapping but distinct constructs” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002, p. 556).

Since the original publication of the concept in 2002, the Dark Triad has gained much scientific attention. Among various outcome measures, for example workplace behavior (O’Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012) or mating strategies (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), unethical behavior has been related to the dark traits: Psychopathy and Machiavellianism predicted exam copying and plagiarism, respectively (Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). Baughman, Jonason, Lyons, and Vernon (2014) found that the Dark Triad, especially Machiavellianism and psychopathy, was associated with lying in an academic context, but also with dishonesty toward mates. Jonason, Lyons, Baughman, and Vernon (2014) reported that dark personalities make use of various inter- and intra-sexual deception tactics, suggesting that the Dark Triad traits reflect cheating strategies.

Kouchaki and Smith (2014) investigated cheating as a form of unethical behavior, but from a very different perspective: In four independent experiments, it was demonstrated that participants engaged in more unethical behavior in the afternoon compared to the morning

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hours. To explain this so-called Morning Morality Effect (MME), the authors referred to the strength model of self-regulation. According to this model, the capacity to exert self-control relies on a limited resource that depletes when demanded (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Self-control comprises the ability to resist temptations and the willpower to act according to moral standards. Indeed, it has been shown that the depletion of self-regulatory resources negatively affects ethical behavior (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). Given that many situations in daily life require self-control (Hofmann, Baumeister, Forster, & Vohs, 2012), self-control resources might diminish gradually throughout the day, resulting in a greater likelihood of self-regulatory failures, including lying or cheating, in the afternoon or evening as compared to the morning hours. In one of their experiments, Kouchaki and Smith (2014) found that lower moral awareness in the afternoon mediated the effect of time of day on cheating. Moreover, they report that moral disengagement moderated the MME such that the MME was especially evident in those with a low propensity to morally disengage.

As previous studies have demonstrated an influence of the Dark Triad and time of day on unethical behavior, the present study aimed at bringing these aspects together. Participants completed the study either in the morning or in the evening, which included a measure of Dark Triad personality traits and two tasks, in which they could cheat or lie. In contrast to previous studies, we decided to operationalize cheating and lying experimentally instead of using self-report questionnaires. It was expected that (1) individuals would be more likely to cheat or lie in the evening than in the morning, thus replicating the MME, and that (2) higher scores on Dark Triad personality traits would be associated with a higher likelihood of cheating or lying. In the original study by Kouchaki and Smith (2014), individual differences (moral disengagement) moderated the MME. As the Dark Triad should comprise a tendency to morally disengage, we also explored possible interactive effects between time of day and scores on Dark Triad personality traits. Specifically, we examined the possibility that unethical behavior in the evening would be particularly observed in individuals scoring high on Dark Triad traits or vice versa.

1.2. Methods

1.2.1. Participants

Data were collected via an online survey tool (<https://www.socsisurvey.de/>). The link to the study was distributed via social networks, local online platforms and student mailing lists. As an incentive, participants who completed the study had the chance to win one out of ten online shopping vouchers. A total of $N = 243$ participants started the survey, but data from $n = 48$ participants were excluded from analyses because they did not complete the entire study. The final sample comprised $n = 195$ participants (70.8% female, $n = 138$). Mean age was $M = 25.73$ years ($SD = 6.96$) and mean sleep duration during the past night was $M = 7.26$ h ($SD = 1.43$).

1.2.2. Measures

1.2.2.1. Short Dark Triad (SD3)

The SD3 (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) assesses the Dark Triad personality traits with 27 items (nine items per subscale). Items are scored on a five-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The psychopathy subscale includes items related to impulsivity, callous manipulation and antisocial behavior. The Machiavellianism subscale includes items related to cynicism and manipulation tactics. The narcissism subscale includes items related to selfishness and a sense of grandiosity. Internal consistencies were $\alpha = .76$ (Machiavellianism), $\alpha = .68$ (narcissism), and $\alpha = .69$ (psychopathy) in the current study and, thus, comparable to those reported in the validation studies (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

1.2.2.2. Global vigor and affect (GVA)

The GVA instrument (Monk, 1989) was used to control for participants' current vigor and affective state. It consists of eight items asking for current alertness, sadness, tension, effort, happiness, weariness, calmness, and sleepiness. Participants respond on a visual analog scale anchored *very little* (0) and *very much* (100). Global vigor is calculated with the formula $[(\text{alert}) + 300 - (\text{sleepy}) - (\text{effort}) - (\text{weary})] / 4$ and global affect with the formula $[(\text{happy}) + (\text{calm}) + 200 - (\text{sad}) - (\text{tense})] / 4$. Each formula yields a value between 0 and 100 with higher values indicating higher vigor and more positive affect, respectively.

1.2.2.3. Message-Task

To operationalize unethical behavior we used a decision-making task (Gneezy, 2005), in which participants had the opportunity to lie in order to allegedly raise the amount of the voucher (see below). The task was slightly changed as compared to the task used by Kouchaki and Smith (2014): The payment options mentioned in our task were higher and had greater differences than those used by Kouchaki and Smith (2014) to increase the probability of cheating. Participants were told that a second player would be involved. This second player was fictitious, which the participants did not know. Participants were given two payment options. The first option was for the benefit of the second player, the second option was in favor of the participant: "Option 1: You will receive 5.00€, whereas Player 2 will receive 15.00€." and "Option 2: You will receive 7.00€, whereas Player 2 will receive 5.00€." Participants were told that the actual payment would depend on Player 2's choice. To inform Player 2 about the payment options, participants had to choose between two messages, which allegedly would be sent to fictitious Player 2. The first message was veracious, the second message variation was a lie: "Message A: Option 1 can bring you more money than Option 2." versus "Message B: Option 2 will bring you more money than Option 1." Deciding to lie was therefore clearly linked to a financial incentive in this task. In the current study, 22.1% ($n = 43$) participants chose the dishonest message option.

1.2.2.4. Matrix-Task

As a second task to operationalize unethical behavior, we used a visual search task as used by Mazar, Amir, and Ariely (2008) and Kouchaki and Smith (2014). In this task, participants were able to increase their profit level by making false statements about their performance. Participants were presented a total of 20 matrices. Each matrix contained three rows and four columns consisting of a total of 12-digit numbers with one or two decimals (Fig. 1) and was presented for 15 s. During these 15 s, participants had to find two numbers which summed up to 10. Of the 20 presented matrices, 13 were solvable. Each presentation was followed by a page, on which the participant had to indicate whether he or she had found the two numbers or not. Indicating that the matrix was solved resulted in a profit increase of 2.50€. Choosing the option "Not found" did not yield any profit increase. It was not expected

| | | |
|------|------|------|
| 7.87 | 3.62 | 9.41 |
| 5.72 | 7.4 | 5.84 |
| 2.49 | 9.59 | 6.62 |
| 4.16 | 5.61 | 0.49 |

Fig. 1. Example of a matrix used in the Matrix-Task to operationalize unethical behavior.

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