



The Dark Triad across academic majors

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ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) have been associated with the desire for power, status, and social dominance in the workplace, and these desires have been hypothesized to draw Dark Triad individuals towards occupations affording such outcomes. Following this reasoning, the Dark Triad may also influence educational choices. Research in other personality traits has shown that Big Five traits impact educational choices: Students in different academic majors differ on Big Five traits at enrollment. The aim of the present study was to explore whether there are also pre-existing Dark Triad differences across academic majors. Accordingly, the Big Five and the Dark Triad traits were measured in a sample of newly enrolled students ($N = 487$) in different academic majors (psychology, economics/business, law, and political science), and mean scores were compared. Group differences in the Big Five personality traits largely replicated previous findings. Group differences in the Dark Triad traits were also found and included medium and large effect sizes with the largest differences being between economics/business students (having high Dark Triad scores) and psychology students (having low Dark Triad scores). These findings indicate that Dark Triad as well as Big Five traits may influence educational choices.

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1. Introduction

Most of us probably hold some preconceptions about people in other occupations. And if we don't, there is no shortage of stereotypical characters in the entertainment industry to draw inspiration from. Lawyers and businessmen, for example, are in movies and series often portrayed as manipulating and cynical individuals who use other people for their own gain and are ready to do whatever it takes to get ahead (Asimow, 2000; Ribstein, 2012). These characters are often unlikeable, yet strangely fascinating, and they can, admittedly, be quite entertaining to watch. But the stereotypical characters aside, are there actually more of these “dark” personalities within the fields of law and business than among people in other academic fields, and do they become “dark” during their academic schooling, or do they choose their academic field based on pre-existing dark personality characteristics? Scholars within the social sciences have argued that the academic schooling within law and business schools promotes a view of human nature and a behavioral pattern that heavily emphasize self-interest (for an overview, see Elegido, 2009). If this is true, then a higher prevalence of “dark” personalities within the fields of law and business could be a function of socialization processes, and then law and business schools influence not only the professional development of their students, but also their personality development. However, it may also be the case that dark

personalities are prevalent within law and business simply because individuals with dark personality characteristics are attracted to law and business majors in the first place. If this is true, then one would expect to find more dark individuals within these academic fields already at enrolment. The present study tested this self-selection hypothesis and drew inspiration from previous personality and organizational research.

1.1. The Big Five and academic majors

A recent review of research on Big Five personality traits across academic majors concluded that law, business, and economics students score consistently lower on the personality trait agreeableness than students enrolled in other majors, particularly when they are compared with for example psychology, humanities, or arts students (Vedel, 2016). Individuals who score low on agreeableness are competitive, skeptical, and tough-minded (Costa & McCrae, 1992), and as such, law, business, and economics students have perhaps the closest thing to a “dark” personality within the Big Five taxonomy compared with other students.

1.2. The Dark Triad in the workplace

However, it has been argued that the Big Five do not adequately capture dark and socially undesirable characteristics such as the tendency to be manipulative and exploitive of others (e.g. Lee & Ashton, 2014). Accordingly, socially aversive characteristics have been studied by means of other trait constructs (Kowalski, 2001), and three such traits

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are psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism. Paulhus and Williams (2002) coined the term *Dark Triad* to highlight the shared features of these three traits and encourage researchers to study them in tandem. Since then, research on the Dark Triad has expanded rapidly (see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013, for an overview), and even more so with the advent of the brief composite measures: the Dirty Dozen (DD; Jonason & Webster, 2010) and the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The Dark Triad has been studied in relation to workplace behaviors, where individuals scoring high on Dark Triad traits have been found to use more manipulation at work (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012), display counterproductive work behavior (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012), and exhibit high desire for power (Lee et al., 2013). The desire for power, status, and social dominance characterizing Dark Triad individuals has been hypothesized to draw these individuals towards occupations affording opportunities to achieve these outcomes and steer them away from other occupations (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014), and research on vocational interests generally supports this view (Jonason et al., 2014; Kowalski, Vernon, & Schermer, 2017).

1.3. The Dark Triad and academic majors

It seems plausible that Dark Triad individuals would choose academic majors with perceived potential to gain power and status, such as business or law. Given the relative novelty of the conception of the Dark Triad, research in Dark Triad group differences across academic majors is very limited, though. Wilson and McCarthy (2011) explored subclinical psychopathy in university students and found that commerce and law students scored significantly higher on this trait than arts and science students. But neither narcissism nor Machiavellianism was measured, and the students were enrolled in various semesters, which means that socialization effects within faculties cannot be ruled out as explanation for the differences. Krack et al. (2016), on the other hand, included all Dark Triad traits and found higher scores on the Dark Triad for business and management students than for other students. Also, students between first and sixth semester were categorized as "beginners", while the remaining were categorized as "advanced", and the two groups were compared in an effort to rule out socialization effects. However, socialization effects could take place early on in the education, and merging the first six semesters into one category may mask such effects. Furthermore, only Dark Triad composite scores were analyzed in this study, and the business and management students were compared with an undifferentiated "others" group.

1.4. The present study

The main purpose of the present study was to extend existing knowledge on the Dark Triad across academic majors by overcoming some of the methodological limitations of previous studies. Specifically, all the Dark Triad traits were measured, they were analyzed separately, specific academic majors were compared (law, economics/business, psychology, and political science), the students were all newly enrolled, and effect sizes were calculated in order to estimate the magnitude of the personality differences. A secondary aim was to replicate the Big Five personality group differences across academic majors found in previous studies (Vedel, 2016). Also, gender effects have been found on both the Dark Triad and the Big Five personality traits: females generally score lower than males on all Dark Triad traits (Furnham et al., 2013) and higher on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (Vedel, 2016), and gender effects were therefore examined.

Previous research on the Dark Triad and on the Big Five personality traits across academic majors guided the hypotheses. Wilson and McCarthy (2011) found that commerce and law students score higher on psychopathy than arts and science students, and Krack et al. (2016) found that business and management students score higher on the Dark Triad composite compared with other students. Adding to this

the negative relationship between all Dark Triad traits and agreeableness (Vize, Lynam, Collison, & Miller, 2016) and the low levels of agreeableness characterizing law and economics/business students (Vedel, 2016), economics/business and law students were expected to score higher than psychology and political science students on all Dark Triad traits (H1). Based on the Big Five personality group differences across academic majors reported in Vedel (2016), three hypotheses about Big Five personality group differences were formulated: Psychology students will score higher on neuroticism and agreeableness than all other students and higher on openness than economics/business and law students (H2). Political science students will score higher on openness and agreeableness than economics/business and law students and higher on extraversion than psychology students (H3). Economics/business and law students will score higher than psychology students on extraversion (H4).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 487 newly enrolled students at a Danish university in September 2016. The age of the students ranged from 17 to 45 years (mean age = 21.12, $SD = 2.39$), and the students fell into one of four academic fields: psychology ($n = 103$; 87% female), economics/business ($n = 158$; 43% female), law ($n = 93$; 80% female), and political science ($n = 133$; 59% female).

2.2. Procedure

The study was approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency, and the participants were recruited in cooperation with the University Registrar's Office. A welcome email was sent to all newly admitted students in business and social sciences programs inviting them to participate in a study by use of a link to an electronic questionnaire. Students who consented to the study and completed the questionnaire participated in a prize draw for 10 gift vouchers worth US\$145 to shops, cafés, etc. of their choice. Also, a standard personality profile was provided upon request. The present study was part of a larger research project, and the questionnaire measured other constructs than personality traits, such as subjective well-being and academic self-efficacy. Only measures used in the present study will be described here.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. The NEO Five-Factor Inventory

The Big Five personality traits were measured with the Danish adaptation of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Danish version: Hansen, Mortensen, & Schiøtz, 2004). This 60-item questionnaire measures the Big Five personality traits and their respective six facets with 12 items per factor and two items per facet. General personality-relevant statements are self-rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The Danish NEO-FFI is a validated instrument with high internal consistency corresponding to the American NEO-FFI (Hansen et al., 2004). In the current study, Cronbach's α for the NEO-FFI scales ranged from 0.76 for openness to 0.85 for conscientiousness (see Table 1).

2.3.2. The Short Dark Triad

The Dark Triad personality traits were measured with the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The SD3 is a 27-item questionnaire measuring Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy with 9 items per trait. The items are personality-relevant statements, which are self-rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). For the present study, the SD3 was translated into Danish independently by an English expert and a psychological researcher not involved in the project. Back-translations were performed

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