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The Dark Triad traits and individual differences in self-reported and other-rated creativity

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ABSTRACT

The current study ($N = 402$) explored the relationship between the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) and individual differences in creativity. We measured the Dark Triad traits with the Dirty Dozen and the Short Dark Triad. Participants completed three alternative use tasks that were independently scored by four judges for the number of responses offered (i.e., fluency), the general level of creativity, and the harmfulness of their responses (i.e., using an innocent object for nefarious purposes). We also assessed self-reported creativity with an *ad hoc* measure of domain-general creative ability. Those high in narcissism reported being more creative than most individuals, but were rated as less creative. Machiavellianism and psychopathy were positively correlated with harm-based creativity; with male-specific correlations in psychopathy. Results are discussed in terms of creativity as an expression of latent biases that characterize the Dark Triad traits.

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In hopes of better understanding darker aspects of personality psychology, researchers have begun to assess individual differences in the Dark Triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) in relation to various psychology fields (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009; Spain, Harms, & Lebertson, 2014). The Dark Triad traits are characterized by vanity and self-centeredness (i.e., narcissism), manipulation and cynicism (i.e., Machiavellianism), and callous social attitudes and aggressiveness (i.e., psychopathy). Previous research on the associations between darker personality traits and individual differences in creativity has revealed that narcissism accounts for the most variance in self-reported creative outputs with limited evidence for links for psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Furnham, Hughes, & Marshall, 2013; Jonason, Richardson, & Potter, 2015; McKay, Karwowski, & Kaufman, 2017). Furthermore, disagreeableness is correlated with creativity (Batey, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2009; Furnham et al., 2013; King, Walker, & Broyles, 1996). Given the centrality of disagreeableness when understanding the Dark Triad traits, the failure to find associations for psychopathy and Machiavellianism is puzzling.

Unfortunately, the research on the relationships between and the Dark Triad traits and individual differences in creativity is limited in a number of ways. First, the results were equivocal across different measures of self-reported creativity across artistic domains like music, theater, and dance (Galang, Castelo, Santos, Perlas, & Angeles, 2016; Jonason, Richardson, & Potter, 2015; McKay et al., 2017). Second, few studies have assessed the Dark Triad traits in relation to individual

differences in creative ability in the form of fluency (i.e., the number of creative responses one can generate) or had participant's creative expressions of participants judged and rated objectively. And, third, as most research on creativity tends to assume it is used as a force for good (Batey, 2006; Guilford, 1967; Runco & Jaeger, 2012), its standardized assessments may be biased in that way. Few studies have attempted to assess the darker or more aggressive or even criminalistic variants of creative expression (Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, & Runco, 2010; Gino & Ariely, 2012; Walczyk, Runco, Tripp, & Smith, 2008) in relation the Dark Triad traits. In this study, we address these limitations from the framework that creative expression, or the lack thereof, is a downstream correlate of the cognitive and motivational biases characteristic of each trait (Lee & Dow, 2011; Yoruk & Runco, 2014).

While there is considerable overlap between the Dark Triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), there is still cause to explore the traits independently. For example, psychopathy and Machiavellianism appear to be the “darker” shades of the Triad (Jonason, Strosser, Kroll, Duineveld, & Baruffi, 2015). This aggressive (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012), deceptive (Baughman, Jonason, Vernon, & Lyons, 2014), and antisocial (Cleckley, 1941) nature may result in a destructively biased form of creative expression. As such, we predict these traits to be correlated with individual differences in the capability of seeing innocuous objects (e.g., a brick) in nefarious, antisocial ways (e.g., breaking a window). In addition, given the cross-culturally stable sex differences in the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013) and aggressiveness, there is cause to predict that these correlations might be moderated by participant's sex such that it is in men that the correlations between Machiavellianism and psychopathy are linked to this form of “dark” creative expression.

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In contrast, narcissism is uniquely characterized by its associated, inflated self-appraisals (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003), appraisals that are often in direct contradiction to how others see them (John & Robins, 1994) and may result in greater self-reported creative outputs (Galang et al., 2016; Jonason, Richardson, & Potter, 2015). However, it is unclear whether narcissism is genuinely associated with greater abilities in creative enterprises (Lasch, 1979) or whether they just report more creative ability as part of their general sense of seeing themselves in a positive and even inflated ways. In order to test this “delusions of grandeur” hypothesis, we examine whether narcissism is correlated with self-rated and other-rated creativity.

And last, psychopathy is considered the “worst” of the Dark Triad traits, showing stronger links to various cognitive deficits and interests that may undermine creative outputs (Jonason, Richardson, & Potter, 2015; but see Galang et al., 2016). Those high in psychopathy may be impulsive and lack self-control (Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011) which may undermine the cognitively demanding task of being creative by limiting focus and encouraging a tendency to rush through tasks (Guilford, 1967). The lack of creativity associated with psychopathy may be *prime facie* evidence for the pathological nature of this trait. In addition, if the apparent limited creativity is a function heightened impulsivity, when we control for the time taken to complete the task, the correlations between psychopathy and creativity should be nearly zero.

Creativity has implications for the psychology of children (Urban, 1991) and the elderly (Flood & Phillips, 2007), and is related to individual differences in intelligence (Barron & Harrington, 1981), decision making (Collins & Koechlin, 2012), and personality (Baas, Roskes, Sligte, Nijstad, & De Dreu, 2013; Wolfradt & Pretz, 2001). However, most work has focused on more socially desirable aspects of personality like openness to experience and extraversion (King et al., 1996; Sung & Choi, 2009). Here we build on previous research on the Dark Triad traits and individual differences in creativity from the perspective that the former represent latent motivational biases that drive downstream factors like the latter.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

American MTurk workers ($N = 248$; US\$0.50) and Australian volunteers solicited through Facebook ($N = 154$), aged 17–70 ($M = 32.52$, $SD = 11.08$; 186 men, 216 women), participated in this study.¹ The majority (81%) of the sample was of White/Caucasian descent, with 4% Hispanic/Latino descent, 6% of Asian descent, 4% Black/African American descent, and the remainder reporting some “other” ethnic identity. The average participant had a tertiary school degree (53%) or a secondary school degree (24%). Participants were informed of the nature of the study, gave consent, completed measures discussed below, reported demographics, and were thanked and debriefed upon completion. With the exception of a weak correlation between age and number of responses offered ($r(400) = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$), results in the creativity tasks did not differ as a function of ethnicity (i.e., white v. non-white), sample-type, or level of education and, thus, analyses are conducted across those distinctions.

¹ Men and women were largely the same for measures of creative ability ($t_s = -0.14$ to -1.52) but men ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.68$) felt they had more ($t(400) = 4.00$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.40$) creative ability than women did ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.67$), which was partially mediated by partially mediated by individual differences in the Dirty Dozen measure of narcissism (Sobel's $z = 2.73$, $p < 0.01$) and in the Short Dark Triad measure of narcissism ($z = 2.70$, $p < 0.01$). Unsurprisingly, men scored higher on the Dark Triad traits than women did with the largest sex differences in psychopathy (Cohen's $d = 0.45$) for the Dirty Dozen and Machiavellianism ($d = 0.32$) for the Short Dark Triad. More details available upon request.

1.2. Ratings

Creative ability was measured using three (i.e., brick, newspaper, and paperclip) alternative uses objects (Gilhooly, Fioratou, Anthony, & Wynn, 2007) in an online, free-response assessment. Participants were given only 3 min per object in hopes of simultaneously minimizing fatigue, any online searching for responses, and to get at spontaneous, cognitive flexibility over more deliberative processing. Participants took on average 319 s ($SD = 154.92$) to complete all three object tasks; a variable we include in analyses as a covariate later. We treated participants' responses in three ways but generally did so to avoid scoring problems in others ways of assessing creativity (Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zaccaro, & Johnson, 1998).

First, participants collective responses across the three objects were independently scored by four trained judges (the last four authors) for creativity (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) using the Consensual Assessment Technique (Amabile, 1982). For example, with the target item “brick”, if participants said it was to be used to “build a home” indicated a low score of one, whereas, using a “brick” to stop weeds from growing was scored a five. Each rater independently evaluated each participant's responses to each task and arrived at an average creativity rating for each participant (Mean Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$, across raters). The ratings of the four were summed across all three objects giving us an other-rated average score of participant's creativity with high inter-rater reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$; $M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.81$).

Second, the same four raters counted the number of responses each participant offered to all three objects. Each rater provided a total count for each participant per object. We averaged the number of responses offered by each rater across each of the three objects to create a count of creative responses with high inter-rater reliability ($\alpha = 0.99$; $M = 18.98$, $SD = 8.80$; *Range* = 3 to 94).

Third, the same four raters assessed a random selection of 1/4 of the data independently (Silvia et al., 2008) on how “harmful” (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*) each participant's responses could be after a training session where all five authors did three evaluations collectively to reach consensus and to standardize evaluations. This was adopted as opposed to more lengthy inter-rater reliability procedures from above to save time. Again, we used the Consensual Assessment Technique (Amabile, 1982). For example, if a participant indicated they would use the target item “brick” as a “weapon” this was scored a five, whereas to score a one, the participant needed to list a “brick” to “build a house”. We compared scores across the four raters on the data each evaluated, suggesting raters did not systematically differ on how they evaluated the random selection of participants they were allocated ($F(3, 398) = 0.77$, $p > 0.05$) and, thus, the ratings from the four raters were averaged across the three objects to get a sense of the harmfulness of the responses in a single index ($M = 2.79$; $SD = 1.23$).

1.3. Measures

We measured self-reported, general creative ability as opposed to success in domains of creativity (e.g., Silvia, Wigert, Reiter-Palmon, & Kaufman, 2012) with an 11-item author-constructed measure. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with items like “I am innovative in my approach to situations” and “When I am shown a new object, I often think of multiple ways I can use that object”. Given that we created this measure, we ran a Principal Components Analysis with a varimax rotation. These items loaded well (i.e., 0.61–0.81) on a single factor (Eigen = 5.14; 51.35% of the variance) and, thus, were averaged to create a single index of self-reported creativity ($\alpha = 0.89$; $M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.69$). A full account of the actual items used is available upon request.

The 27-item Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) was used to measure Machiavellianism (e.g., I like to use clever manipulation to get my way.), narcissism (e.g., I insist on getting the respect I deserve.), and psychopathy (e.g., people who mess with me always regret it.).

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