



## Expectancy biases underneath the Dark Triad traits: Associations with optimism, pessimism, and hopelessness



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### ABSTRACT

Personality traits play a key role in understanding optimism, but few studies have examined how “darker” aspects of personality relate to individual differences in trait-level optimism. We examined whether the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) were associated with individual differences in optimism (i.e., Life Orientation Test; Lerner Optimism Scale; Beck Hopelessness Scale). Our results were rather compelling in that across measures and countries sampled, narcissism was associated with more optimism whereas psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated with less. Results are discussed in terms of how such outlooks or expectancies are likely to color the social interactions that people characterized by the Dark Triad traits engage in and the social consequences they may experience.

### 1. Introduction

For most of the 20th century, psychological research presented a rather bleak view of people with its focus on Freudian (e.g., neuroses) and Behaviorist (e.g., stimulus response) models (Hergenhahn, 2005). With the emergence of Third-Force, Humanistic, and Positive Psychology, more attention has been drawn to how psychology can inform on and even improve people's happiness (Diener, 1999). Happiness can reflect a stable-trait that captures individual differences how positive individuals view their world and lives (Sheldon & Lucas, 2014). Various researchers have pointed to the role of personality traits in accounting for individual differences in happiness (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989; Brebner, Donaldson, Kirby, & Ward, 1995). For example, researchers have focused on the Big Five personality traits, Eysenck's personality traits, and self-esteem (Hills & Argyle, 1998; Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). For example, extraversion, self-esteem, and neuroticism are correlated with happiness (Cheng & Furnham, 2003). However, these traits may be restrictive in that they only tap socially desirable aspects of personality and happiness, alone, may describe a desirable affective state as opposed to a deeper, dispositional bias. In this study, we examine how three socially aversive personality traits relate to individual differences in optimism. The way people view the world (i.e., optimism v. pessimism) is likely to have

serious implications for how they interact with it and may improve our understanding of the underlying motivations of personality (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Snyder, 2002) and to capture expectancy biases.

The Dark Triad traits are a collection of socially undesirable personality features that have become a topic of interest for researchers around the world (see Muris, Merckelbach, Otgaar, & Meijer, 2017). The Dark Triad traits are characterized by grandiosity and self-centeredness (i.e., narcissism), manipulation and cynicism (i.e., Machiavellianism), and callous social attitudes and impulsivity (i.e., psychopathy). The traits are linked to various undesirable outcomes like exploitive sexual attitudes (e.g., Jonason, Girgis, & Milne-Home, 2017), counterproductive workplace behaviors (Spain, Harms, & LeBreton, 2014), and limited empathy (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). Despite correlations among the Dark Triad traits and similar links to some psychosocial phenomena, there is a fundamental division emerging suggesting that narcissism may be distinct from Machiavellianism and psychopathy in terms of their relative “darkness” (McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012). For example, psychopathy is associated with dysfunctional impulsivity whereas narcissism is associated with functional impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011), self-interested values are linked to narcissism whereas antigroup values are associated with Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Jonason, Strosser, Kroll,

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Duineveld, & Baruffi, 2015), and psychopathy is also associated with psychosocial and health costs (e.g., diminished life expectancy) overall and whereas narcissism is linked to an apparent resilience (potentially as a function of denser social networks) from various psychosocial and physical costs (Jonason, Baughman, Carter, & Parker, 2015). We expect to observe this division when correlating the Dark Triad traits with individual differences in optimism.

One short-coming, thus far, in research on the Dark Triad traits is limited knowledge about potential biases that underlie these traits (e.g., Jonason & Fletcher, 2018); one such bias may be captured with individual differences in optimism. Optimism, and its related anti-traits of pessimism and hopelessness, may reflect dispositional patterns in how individuals view the world and the probability of experiencing good and bad events based on their prior experiences (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Weinstein, 1980), thus operating as expectancy biases. That is, experience with unpredictable childhoods may drive pessimism whereas predictable childhoods may drive optimism just like they are associated with psychopathy and narcissism, respectively (Jonason, Icho, & Ireland, 2016; Jonason, Lyons, & Bethell, 2014). These views of the world color how people interact with the world, but there are individual differences in how optimistic or pessimistic people view the world that may be accountable with personality traits like the Dark Triad. Related work suggests narcissism is associated with more happiness and psychopathy is associated with less happiness (Aghahabaei & Blachino, 2015; Egan, Chan, & Shorter, 2014). If narcissists grow up in more favorable conditions (Jonason et al., 2014), they should also have positive expectancies (e.g., optimism) about their future, whereas psychopaths and Machiavellians, growing up in harsher conditions (Jonason et al., 2016), should have more negative expectations about their future (e.g., pessimism).

In this brief, multinational study, we investigate how the Dark Triad traits are associated with individual differences in optimism. We expect narcissism to predispose people to have a positive outlook on life because it facilitates their approach-orientation to the world (Foster & Trimm, 2008) and the related trait of self-esteem is associated with more optimism and lack of hopelessness (Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & DiMatteo, 2006). In contrast, we expect psychopathy (in particular) and Machiavellianism (to a lesser degree) to predispose people to have a more negative outlook on life that enables their cynicism (Jones & Paulhus, 2009) and exploitive approach to life (Jonason et al., 2013).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants ( $N_{Grand} = 937$ ) were 300 Hungarians (129 men), 306 Brazilian (91 men), and 331 American (90 men) undergraduates ( $M_{Age} = 22.67$ ,  $SD_{Age} = 4.66$ ,  $Range = 18$  to 47) who participated in a larger online (translated and back-translated in the Hungarian and Brazilian samples) study about “personality and views of the future” (see Jonason, Foster, et al., 2017) in exchange for course credit in their psychology classes. Site-specific, sample size minimums were determined to have 95% power to detect the average effect size in social and personality psychology ( $r \approx 0.20$ ; Richard, Bond Jr, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003) and to produce stable correlations (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013).

### 2.2. Measures

The 27-item Short Dark Triad scale (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.”). Participants indicated their agreement to the above (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Items for each scale, in each country, were averaged together to create indexes of narcissism

(Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s = 0.51 to 0.71), Machiavellianism ( $\alpha$ s = 0.59 to 0.75), and psychopathy ( $\alpha$ s = 0.60 to 0.78).<sup>1</sup>

We measured individual differences in optimism with the Lerner's Optimism Scale (LOS; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). The scale is composed of 15 items asking participants to estimate their own chances (−4 = *extremely unlikely*; +4 = *extremely likely*) of experiencing 15 future life events relative to the average chances of same-sex students at their own university where approximately half of items were desirable events (e.g., “My achievements were written up in a newspaper.”) and the other half reflected undesirable events (e.g., “I chose the wrong profession.”). Responses to undesirable event items were reverse-coded and all 15 responses were averaged to create a single index of optimism in each country ( $\alpha$ s = 0.64 to 0.70).

Optimism was also measured with the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985). Participants reported their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with three optimistically worded items (e.g., “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.”) and three pessimistically worded items (e.g., “If something can go wrong for me, it will.”). Pessimistically worded items were reverse-scored and all six items were averaged to create a single index of optimism in each country ( $\alpha$ s = 0.57 to 0.79).<sup>2</sup>

We measured individual differences in pessimism—as anti-optimism—via the Beck Hopelessness Scale (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974). The scale is composed of 20 forced-choice, true-false questions (e.g., “I might as well give up because I can't make things better for myself.”). Responses (1 = *True*; 0 = *False*) were averaged to create a single index of pessimism in each country ( $\alpha$ s = 0.78 to 0.84).

Because this was a multinational project, we needed to translate scales from their native language (when called for) to Brazilian Portuguese and Hungarian. The Short Dark Triad has been translated successfully into Hungarian already (e.g., Birkás & Csathó, 2016). For this scale, the Brazilian Portuguese translation was done by having two researchers, who were fluent in both languages, independently translate the scale from English to their respective languages and a third researcher translating it back. Where disagreements arose, the three resolved them together. The same procedure was used for the optimism scales in Hungarian and Brazilian Portuguese.

## 3. Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among the Dark Triad traits and optimism variables observed in the United States, Hungary, and Brazil. Because the LOT, LOS, and BHS were all putative measures of optimism, we sought to simplify the analyses by creating a latent optimism variable reflected by these three observed variables. This would permit relatively simple testing of structural paths representing associations between the three Dark Triad traits and optimism.

### 3.1. Testing measurement invariance of latent optimism

Because data were collected in three different countries, it was important to first test whether the latent construct of optimism was measured equivalently cross-nationally. Because the goal of this study was to examine structural paths between Dark Triad traits and optimism, it was necessary to establish what is commonly referred to as metric invariance. Metric invariance means that factor loadings between the observed optimism variables (i.e., LOT, LOS, and BHS) and latent optimism were consistent across the three countries. In short, this

<sup>1</sup> In the full sample Machiavellianism was correlated with narcissism ( $r = 0.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and psychopathy ( $r = 0.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and psychopathy was correlated with narcissism ( $r = 0.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These correlations held up across the different samples. Cronbach's alphas were the lowest in Brazil for each of the Dark Triad traits (see Jonason, Foster, et al., 2017).

<sup>2</sup> It was Brazil that had the lowest internal consistency.

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