



Shedding light on the dark side: Associations between the dark triad and the DSM-5 maladaptive trait model

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the usefulness of the DSM-5 maladaptive trait model to better understand the building blocks of the dark triad personality traits. Specifically, differential associations with 25 maladaptive personality facets are examined to uncover similarities and differences between the dark triad traits (objective 1). In addition, incremental validity of Five-Factor Model (FFM) maladaptive and FFM general personality domains as predictors of the dark triad traits is examined (objective 2). Data were obtained in a sample of Romanian law enforcement personnel (i.e., police officers, gendarmes, fire-fighters; total N = 266). With regard to the first objective, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, more than narcissism, showed multiple associations with facets from the maladaptive trait model. Grandiosity was found to be the only maladaptive facet that connects all three dark traits. Regarding the second objective, results indicated that DSM-5 maladaptive domains outperformed general Big Five domains when they were considered simultaneously as predictors of the dark triad traits, although the predictive effects of Big Five domains did not disappear completely when maladaptive DSM-5 domains were also taken into account. The results expand the understanding of the dark triad and indicate how abnormal traits supplement normal traits when looking at interrelatedness within the triad.

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1. Introduction

Since it was launched by Paulhus and Williams in 2002, the dark triad of personality has proven to be relevant to understanding human behavior in different life domains including health and well-being (e.g., Aghababaei & Blachnio, 2015), friendships and romantic life (e.g., Jonason, Lyons, & Blanchard, 2015), work life (e.g., O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012), and education (e.g., Turnipseed & Cohen, 2015). Yet, much still remains to be learned about the exact nature of the three dark triad traits, and in particular about their overlap and distinctiveness in terms of core psychological features. As Jonason and Jackson (2016) recently put it, the dark traits are the “new kids on the block” (p. 274) and many questions remain regarding what underlies them.

One approach to disentangle similarities and differences between the dark triad traits has been to relate them to existing and relatively well-understood or ‘mainstream’ (e.g., Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus,

2013) personality taxonomies, such as the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of general personality (e.g., O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, Story, & White, 2015) or the HEXACO model (e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2005). Although valuable, these attempts to integrate the dark triad within broader frameworks of personality are still limited in the sense that they have exclusively focused on general taxonomies tapping into normal personality variation only. This seems problematic, given that at least two of the dark triad traits –i.e. narcissism and psychopathy– are derivatives of clinical syndromes (Furnham et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and it has been argued that dark traits, particularly Machiavellianism and psychopathy, are indistinguishable within the normal range of personality (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998; O'Boyle et al., 2015).

Expanding this literature, the current study aims to further our understanding of the dark triad by delving deeper into the personality traits that underlie them. For the first time in the literature, all three dark triad traits are related simultaneously to a comprehensive trait model explicitly designed to tap into abnormal personality functioning. It is examined how this set of maladaptive traits may help to further clarify the similarities and differences between the dark triad traits (i.e., objective 1). Second, the relevance of introducing maladaptive personality in dark triad research is further examined by directly comparing the predictive validities of general and maladaptive personality

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domains. Specifically, it will also be examined whether and to what extent both personality models have incremental validity in predicting dark triad traits. (i.e., objective 2).

1.1. Associations between dark triad traits and general personality frameworks

All of the Big Five personality domains have been linked to one or more of the dark triad traits (Furnham et al., 2013). Recent meta-analytic work (O'Boyle et al., 2015) has indicated that a negative association with Agreeableness characterizes each of the dark triad traits. Machiavellianism is additionally negatively associated with Conscientiousness and positively with Neuroticism. Narcissism combines low Agreeableness and Neuroticism with higher scores on Extraversion, Openness and Conscientiousness. Finally, psychopathy tends to combine low Agreeableness and Conscientiousness with elevated scores on Extraversion, Neuroticism and Openness. The overall conclusion was that the Big Five traits were consistently and meaningfully associated with the dark triad, explaining between 30 and 63% of the variance in dark traits. Further, it was noted that the general FFM profiles of Machiavellianism and psychopathy in particular proved remarkably similar, raising concerns about the distinctiveness of these two constructs (O'Boyle et al., 2015).

Research has also related the dark triad to the six-factor HEXACO model of personality (Lee & Ashton, 2005). It was found that all three dark traits were strongly negatively correlated with the Honesty-Humility factor, and that the level of communality between the dark triad traits was explained satisfactorily by the HEXACO variables, but not by the FFM variables. In sum, although there are clear connections between these general personality frameworks and the dark triad model, their usefulness in differentiating between dark triad traits, especially Machiavellianism and psychopathy, is limited.

1.2. Introducing the DSM-5 maladaptive trait model in dark triad research

The current work first investigates the overlap and distinctiveness between the dark triad traits in terms of a broad set of maladaptive personality facets. What connects the dark triad traits conceptually (see Jones & Paulhus, 2014) is that Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy are socially aversive personalities, which means that all three entail a socially malevolent or maladaptive character with behavior tendencies toward self-promotion, callousness or emotional coldness, deceitfulness, and aggressiveness. Additionally, Machiavellianism is supposed to be characterized by manipulateness and a strategic-calculating orientation, whereas defining features of psychopathy are assumed to be impulsive recklessness and thrill seeking. Finally, the proposed hallmark characteristics associated with narcissism are grandiosity, self-promotion and attention seeking (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

Krueger, Derringer, Markon, Watson, and Skodol (2012) have developed an extensive personality model that captures -among others- the maladaptive tendencies that define each of the dark triad traits. This DSM-5 maladaptive trait model is now widely used in clinical psychology research aimed to uncover the traits underlying psychopathology (for a summary of this work, see Krueger & Markon, 2014). An overview and description of the 25 maladaptive personality facets specified in this model is provided in the Appendix (based on Krueger & Markon, 2014).

Inspection of the DSM-5 maladaptive trait model clarifies the conceptual overlap with the dark triad. For instance, socially aversive traits such as callousness and deceitfulness are assumed to be characteristic for all three dark traits; impulsivity and risk taking define psychopathy; grandiosity and attention seeking define narcissism; and manipulateness is central to the definition of Machiavellianism (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Previous research has explored how the DSM-5 maladaptive trait model relates to narcissistic personality disorder (Miller, Gentile, Wilson, & Campbell, 2013) and clinical psychopathy (Strickland, Drislane, Lucy, Krueger, & Patrick, 2013). Both these studies

demonstrated that the maladaptive trait model indeed accounts for substantial proportions (i.e., multiple R 's larger than 0.50) of the variance in both clinical syndromes. To the best of our knowledge, no prior research has examined the relationships between Machiavellianism and the maladaptive trait model. The first objective of the current study is to relate this maladaptive trait model to subclinical conceptualizations of all three dark traits simultaneously. Rather than formulating a priori hypotheses, it is investigated on exploratory grounds to what extent DSM-5 maladaptive facets help to delineate the dark triad traits.

1.3. Incremental validity of FFM general and FFM maladaptive domains

Dark triad traits are defined as *subclinical* constructs, which places them in between normal and abnormal domains of personality functioning (Furnham et al., 2013; Paulhus, 2014). To date, this level of abnormality versus normality in dark triad traits has remained largely unaddressed empirically and is, hence, still poorly understood. The current work aims to address this gap in the literature by relating the dark triad traits to both general (normal) and maladaptive (abnormal) personality domains.

Krueger et al. (2012), followed by others (e.g., De Fruyt et al., 2013), have demonstrated that the 25 maladaptive facets in the DSM-5 model can be hierarchically organized under five personality pathology domains identified as Negative Affect, Detachment, Antagonism, Disinhibition and Psychoticism. Moreover, studies investigating the associations between FFM general (or Big Five) traits and DSM-5 maladaptive traits have provided support for the hypothesis that all five domains of the DSM-5 dimensional trait model are extreme and maladaptive variants of general personality structure (i.e., Negative Affect as extreme Neuroticism, Detachment as extreme low Extraversion, Antagonism as extreme low Agreeableness, Disinhibition of extreme low Conscientiousness, and Psychoticism as extreme high Openness; De Fruyt et al., 2013; Gore & Widiger, 2013). Hence, there is consensus in the literature that the FFM is a unifying framework for understanding both adaptive (general) and maladaptive personality. The second objective of the present study is to explore the incremental validity of FFM maladaptive domains beyond FFM general domains and vice versa.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Data were used from a psychological assistance program provided to the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs law enforcement personnel (i.e., police officers, gendarmes, fire-fighters; total $N = 266$). The main objective of this program is to monitor and enhance employee psychological well-being and, if necessary, strengthen resilience (e.g., through coaching). Importantly, people going through this assistance program are ascertained that their results will not be used for personnel decisions including promotions or special assignments (e.g., to international missions). Participants were also aware that their anonymized assessment data could be used for research purposes. All self-report instruments were administered to groups of five to ten employees in paper-and-pencil format. The sample was predominantly male (82.5%) and aged between 22 and 54 years old ($M = 38.21$; $SD = 1.75$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Dark triad

A Romanian version of the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) was used to assess the dark triad of personality. The SD3 consists of 27 items, nine items for each dark trait, that are scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Example items are "It's not wise to tell your secrets" (Machiavellianism), "People see me as a natural leader" (narcissism), and "Payback needs to be quick and nasty" (psychopathy). The Romanian version of the SD3 has been

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