



Full Length Article

Is the Dark Triad common factor distinct from low Honesty-Humility?

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ABSTRACT

There is interest in the psychological meaning of the variance shared among the “Dark Triad” variables (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy). Unknown is the degree to which this common variance is distinct from that of the basic personality dimensions. We test the extent to which the latent Dark Triad overlaps with the low pole of the HEXACO Honesty-Humility factor (traits of sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty). Using meta-analytic estimates from self-report data ($N = 1402$, $k = 4$) we find a near-complete overlap (latent correlation -0.95). Peer report data show a similar pattern. The latent Dark Triad corresponds almost completely with the opposite pole of Honesty-Humility, contrary to assertions that the common Dark Triad variance is distinct from other personality constructs.

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1. Introduction

In a recent article, [Muris, Merckelbach, Otgaar, and Meijer \(2017\)](#) provided a valuable conceptual review and meta-analysis on the three personality variables collectively known as the “Dark Triad” (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy). Their efforts have successfully synthesized past research findings and will serve to stimulate discussion concerning the conceptualization of the Dark Triad and its status in relation to other personality constructs. A point of contention, at present, is whether the underlying Dark Triad common factor contains personality variance outside of the space of the major personality factors. In this article we examine its statistical overlap with Honesty-Humility, one of the basic factors of the HEXACO personality model (e.g., [Ashton & Lee, 2007](#)), to see how far this single factor alone can explain covariance among Dark Triad components. Given recent concerns with “concept creep” ([Haslam, 2016](#)), we here examine whether the latent Dark Triad construct demonstrates any statistical uniqueness. Evidence of near-perfect statistical overlap with a core personality factor (such as Honesty-Humility) would suggest that future research on the *covariation* among the Dark Triad’s subscales is unwarranted.

1.1. The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad consists of three related constructs. *Narcissism* reflects the pursuit of vanity and an overblown self-admiration. *Machiavellianism* reflects a “cynical disregard for morality” with an emphasis on “self-interest and personal gain” ([Muris et al., 2017, p. 184](#)) marked by duplicity and deceit. *Psychopathy* is generally considered an individual difference characterized by callous affect, low empathy, antisocial behavior, and reckless lifestyle choices. For further details see reviews by [Furnham, Richards, and Paulhus \(2013\)](#), [Paulhus and Williams \(2002\)](#), [Paulhus \(2014\)](#), and [Muris et al. \(2017\)](#).

In coining the term “Dark Triad,” [Paulhus and Williams \(2002\)](#) made several important theoretical and conceptual points. First, these “subclinical” constructs are derived conceptually from similar clinical (and maladaptive) constructs, but describe meaningful inter-individual differences within general population samples. Second, although important in their own right (i.e., independently), these constructs *covary* in ways that are psychologically meaningful. Colorful language is used to reflect this covariation, including “latent supertrait of malevolence” or an “overlapping constellation” of “dark personalities” or a “callous constellation” (e.g., [Jones & Paulhus, 2014](#); [Muris et al., 2017](#); [Paulhus, 2014](#)). Others have described the Dark Triad traits as a “bundle” ([Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009](#)), a “cluster of personality traits” ([Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010](#)), or an “antisocial trinity” ([Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010](#)). Others refer to the Dark Triad

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as “an orientation”, “an exploitative social style” (Jonason et al., 2009), or even as a “strategy” (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2010) or a “coordinated system” (Jonason, Girgis, & Milne-Home, 2017) for exploitation and cheating. Common to these descriptions is the explicit or implicit understanding that these specific traits “go together” for a reason.

This position implies that what these traits share in *common* (as a latent construct) is important and presumably distinct from other personality dimensions. Although some covariation between some Dark Triad measures may represent item-content overlap (Muris et al., 2017), the covariation itself could be psychologically meaningful. For example, Paulhus (2014, p. 422) observed that a “positive manifold of negative traits... suggest[s] a *common component* that may have psychological significance in its own right” [italics added]. Paulhus and Williams (2002) have also suggested that three traits “share a common core” and describe it as a “root” of the triad’s negativity (p. 561). As an example, Jones and Neria (2015) modelled a latent Dark Triad variable and found that it strongly predicted a latent Aggression variable ($r = 0.64$). Indeed, research has successfully conceptualized the Dark Triad as a latent construct (e.g., Bertl, Pietschnig, Tran, Steiger, & Voracek, 2017; Jonason & Webster, 2010). Jonason et al. (2017) go so far as to say that without the shared or common variance among the triad variables, the leftover variances are “shadows” (p. 698) of themselves and of questionable value in predicting outcomes (such as, in their study, rape attitudes). Relatedly, Jones and Figueredo (2013) found that the “Dark Core” of the Dark Triad is captured by Hare’s Factor 1 (callous manipulation), with Dark Triad residuals showing little correlation after accounting for this common element.

Thus, in research on the Dark Triad variables, a common core is generally posited and confirmed. Researchers differ primarily in terms of how to interpret this covariance (see e.g., Furnham, Richards, Rangel, & Jones, 2014), not whether it exists. Even those researchers primarily arguing that the triad traits are distinct and worthy of study in their own right (e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2011, 2017) nonetheless speak of these constructs as though a latent factor underpins them. Indeed, in the words of its founder: “To warrant membership in the dark constellation... candidates must share the callousness that unites the others” (Paulhus, 2014, p. 424). (For a fuller list of quotations where authors imply or state that there is a common or latent core to the Dark Triad, see Supplemental Table 1.)

The Dark Triad variables clearly covary, with meta-analytic correlations in the 0.34–0.58 range (Muris et al., 2017, Fig. 3). We seek to examine whether the Dark Triad covariation can be accounted for by basic personality dimensions. We pay special attention to Honesty-Humility, one of the six dimensions of the HEXACO model of personality structure. As operationalized in the HEXACO Personality Inventory–Revised (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2004, in press), Honesty-Humility is defined by four facet-level traits called Sincerity, Fairness, Greed Avoidance, and Modesty (see Table 1; see also descriptions at <http://hexaco.org/scaledescriptions/>).

As noted by others (e.g., Jones & Paulhus, 2017; Muris et al., 2017; Paulhus, 2014), Honesty-Humility facets are conceptually related to the Dark Triad components (see Table 1 for comparisons). The Honesty-Humility facets are also empirically related to the individual Dark Triad subscales, with meta-analytic correlations in the -0.09 to -0.56 range (averaging -0.36) (see Muris et al., 2017, Table 3). This raises the question of whether the Dark Triad overlaps almost completely with the low pole of Honesty-Humility from the HEXACO personality space, when the two constructs are considered as latent factors. Paulhus (2014) has explic-

Table 1

Characteristic features of Dark Triad components and Honesty-Humility facets.

Dark Triad components	
Narcissism	The pursuit of gratification from vanity or egotistic admiration of one’s own attributes
Machiavellianism	A duplicitous interpersonal style, a cynical disregard for morality, and a focus on self-interest and personal gain
Psychopathy	A personality trait characterized by enduring antisocial behavior, diminished empathy and remorse, and disinhibited or bold behavior
Honesty-Humility facets	
Sincerity	A tendency to be genuine in interpersonal relations. Low scorers will flatter others or pretend to like them in order to obtain favors, whereas high scorers are unwilling to manipulate others
Fairness	A tendency to avoid fraud and corruption. Low scorers are willing to gain by cheating or stealing, whereas high scorers are unwilling to take advantage of other individuals or of society at large
Greed avoidance	A tendency to be uninterested in possessing lavish wealth, luxury goods, and signs of high social status. Low scorers want to enjoy and to display wealth and privilege, whereas high scorers are not especially motivated by monetary or social-status considerations
Modesty	A tendency to be modest and unassuming. Low scorers consider themselves as superior and as entitled to privileges that others do not have, whereas high scorers view themselves as ordinary people without any claim to special treatment

Note. Dark Triad text drawn verbatim from Muris et al. (2017, Table 1); HEXACO text drawn verbatim from <http://hexaco.org/scaledescriptions/>.

itly considered a similar possibility, stating that “. . . one intriguing possibility for future research would involve measuring both positive and dark personality traits in the same people. We suspect that they are not polar opposites” (p. 424). Here we take up this suggestion with an empirical approach, expecting that the underlying “light” and “dark” factors will in fact be polar opposites (i.e., two ends of a common dimension). That is, for those interested in the shared variance among the Dark Triad traits, it would be of value to consider the degree to which this covariance is essentially the opposite of Honesty-Humility. Our purpose therefore is to quantify the previously observed conceptual overlap between the Dark Triad and Honesty-Humility (e.g., Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015; Lee & Ashton, 2005, 2014; Lee et al., 2013; Muris et al., 2017; Paulhus, 2014).

1.2. The present analysis

Whether or not the Dark Triad latent factor can be accounted for by basic personality factors such as Honesty-Humility is an empirical question. In light of the meta-analytic results presented by Muris et al. (2017), we anticipate a great deal of overlap, with little remaining variance after modelling the relation between these constructs. Past research has illustrated the value in such an approach. For example, the link between psychological essentialism and racism, or between generalized authoritarianism and generalized prejudice, doubles when measured at the latent level, often approaching a perfect correlation (i.e., unity) (Hodson, MacInnis, & Busseri, 2017; Hodson & Skorska, 2015). Within the Dark Triad domain, researchers have modelled its common variance to represent a Dark Triad latent variable (e.g., Bertl et al., 2017; Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009; Jones & Neria, 2015), an approach we employ here.

Despite modest correlations between the Dark Triad facets and the Honesty-Humility facets (average $r = -0.36$ in Muris et al., 2017), correlations between Dark Triad and Honesty-Humility

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