



The Dark Triad of personality in adolescence: Psychometric properties of a concise measure and associations with adolescent adjustment from a multi-informant perspective



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ABSTRACT

Accumulating evidence suggests that the Dark Triad of personality (i.e., Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) is useful in explaining individual differences in adult adjustment. The present study is among the first to examine unique effects of these traits on multi-informant ratings of adolescent aggressive behavior. In two samples ($N_s = 611$ and 302), we first established measurement invariance, internal consistency and validity of the 12-item Dirty Dozen Dark Triad measure. Furthermore, we found unique associations of each Dark Triad trait with particular forms of aggression, with inconsistent results across informants providing greater insight into these traits. Overall, Dark Triad traits seem applicable to adolescents and useful correlates of adolescent adjustment, especially if their unique effects are studied.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, the Dark Triad of personality (Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) has caught a great deal of attention in studies on (young) adults. Yet, little is known about the role of these maladaptive personality traits in adolescence. In the present study, the utility of the Dark Triad in adolescence will be tested by examining (a) the psychometric properties of a brief Dark Triad measure and (b) its associations with direct and indirect forms of aggression based on self-, teacher-, and peer-reports.

1.1. Dark Triad

Studies on personality in normative samples have typically focused on general personality traits like the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Because there is increasing evidence for the absence of a qualitative breach between healthy and unhealthy personality (Bernstein, Iscan, & Maser, 2007), one could suggest that using the Big Five is sufficient for capturing the unhealthy and dysfunctional part of the personality trait spectrum. Previous studies have shown that Big Five traits are indeed reasonably well-able to capture individual differences at the dysfunctional end of the personality spectrum (e.g., Miller, Bagby, Pilkonis, Reynolds, & Lynam, 2005). However, dysfunctional behavioral tendencies are often complex

combinations of Big Five traits and specific facets underlying these traits. Therefore, several models have been developed to capture individual differences in dysfunctional personality traits in a more direct manner. Because of the increasing evidence for a continuum from normal and healthy personality to abnormal and unhealthy personality, traits from these models are increasingly often examined in samples drawn from the general population.

There are several taxonomies that attempt to capture the dysfunctional personality traits. Of these taxonomies the Dark Triad has perhaps received the most attention in the last ten years, at least within the social psychology and personality psychology literature (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012). This model includes the traits of Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissism refers to a tendency to have grandiose (i.e., inflated) self-views supplemented by intrapsychic and interpersonal strategies to maintain these self-views (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Individuals exhibiting high levels of Psychopathy tend to be impulsive as well as low on empathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Finally, Machiavellianism refers to a tendency to exploit others to one's own advantage by adopting a manipulative interpersonal style (cf. Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996).

Several studies have shown that Dark Triad traits are strongly associated with Big Five traits (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Across these studies,¹

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¹ In our discussion of existing empirical studies, we attempted to limit ourselves to studies with sample sizes over 150, because there are very few instances in which samples smaller than that are justifiable when examining correlations (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013).

Agreeableness has been shown to be consistently negatively associated with Machiavellianism and Psychopathy. Conscientiousness is consistently negatively associated with Machiavellianism, and there is some evidence for a negative association with Psychopathy. Extraversion is consistently positively associated with Narcissism. Some evidence has been found for a negative association of Neuroticism with Psychopathy (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), but generally this Big Five trait is not consistently associated with the Dark Triad. Openness is also not consistently associated with the Dark Triad. These associations indicate that the Dark Triad as a whole captures the antagonistic (i.e., non-agreeable) side of personality, while each trait has some additional unique associations with Big Five personality traits (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013).

The associations with the Big Five highlight that the Dark Triad traits are conceptually different from each other but also overlap in the sense that they all capture certain socially undesirable tendencies (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Specifically, Dark Triad traits share about 50% of their variance (e.g., Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010). Therefore, when studying Dark Triad traits it is recommended to include all three traits to be able to examine which effects are due to the shared variance between Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy, and which effects are due to their unique variance (Jonason & Webster, 2010).

Previous research including the entire Dark Triad in a single study on adolescents is sparse. This may be due to the fact that measuring these traits with traditional separate questionnaires for Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and Narcissism means that 91 items have to be used (Webster & Jonason, 2013). Recently, a brief alternative for these lengthy measures has been developed: The twelve-item Dirty Dozen questionnaire (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Compared to using three separate questionnaires, the Dirty Dozen has the additional advantage of using the same rating scale for each of the Dark Triad traits. Furthermore, the psychometric properties of the subscales of the Dirty Dozen appear to be better than those of instruments that have been used to measure these traits separately. For example, the Dirty Dozen uses a likert-type scale for Narcissism instead of the dichotomous items that are used in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988) that has traditionally been employed to tap this construct. In addition, the most commonly used Machiavellianism measure (MACH IV; Christie & Geis, 1970) frequently yields relatively low Cronbach's Alphas, which points to internal consistency issues (Jonason & Webster, 2010).

Obviously, the brevity of the Dirty Dozen comes with some costs regarding the bandwidth of its subscales (Miller et al., 2012). Nevertheless, it provides a viable and practical alternative to lengthy measures tapping Dark Triad traits separately (e.g., Jonason & Luéveno, 2013). Yet, so far, only one study employed the Dirty Dozen measure in an adolescent sample (Muris, Meesters, & Timmermans, 2013). This study used a relatively small sample ($N = 117$) and the Dirty Dozen measure was not formally validated.

1.2. The role of age and gender

It has long been questioned whether self-reports on personality traits in adolescents should be used, but in the last decade there has been increasing evidence regarding the validity and reliability of adolescent self-reports on Big Five traits (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2008) and pathological traits (De Clercq, De Fruyt, Van Leeuwen, & Mervielde, 2006; De Clercq et al., 2014; Tromp & Koot, 2010). Adolescent self-reports on personality already seem reasonably valid and reliable in ten-year olds (Soto et al., 2008). However, the older adolescents get, the more differentiated their view on personality (i.e., the lower the average correlations between traits) becomes (Allik, Laidra, Realo, & Pullmann, 2004;

Soto et al., 2008). Specifically, traits such as Agreeableness and Conscientiousness may be highly correlated in young adolescents, but such correlations tend to drop as adolescents grow older. This suggests that older adolescents are better able to distinguish, for example, prosocial behavior from organized and planful behavioral tendencies. Given that the Dark Triad traits are strongly associated yet distinguishable entities, one might expect that older adolescents provide increasingly more differentiated self-ratings on the Dark Triad as they grow older. Information on trait differentiation is important in order to better understand whether the nature of the Dark Triad is similar or changes throughout adolescence.

In addition to age effects on the structure of the Dark Triad, there may also be gender effects. In general, it is getting increasingly common in psychology to test for measurement invariance across groups in order to examine whether results obtained in one group (e.g., men) can be compared to those obtained in another group (e.g., women). Such tests are crucial in order to be sure that, for example, gender differences truly represent differences between men and women, and not just measurement error (cf. van de Schoot, Lugtig, & Hox, 2012). Unfortunately, there appear to be no studies that have established measurement invariance across gender for Dark Triad measures. Still, gender differences in the Dark Triad have been examined in studies assessing these traits collectively in adults. Although there were some inconsistencies across studies, men tend to score higher than women on all three Dark Triad traits (Furnham et al., 2013). The one study that examined these traits collectively in adolescents (Muris et al., 2013), and studies solely focusing on adolescent Narcissism (e.g., Ojanen, Findley, & Fuller, 2012), Psychopathy (e.g., Decuyper, De Bolle, De Fruyt, & De Clercq, 2011), and Machiavellianism (e.g., Peters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010) had similar results. However, these gender differences were not large. Additionally and as previously mentioned, measurement invariance across gender had not been established in studies, which makes the validity of these gender differences disputable.

1.3. Associations with direct and indirect aggression

Research examining linkages of personality traits with adolescent adjustment is flourishing. However, such studies (e.g., De Bolle, Beyers, De Clercq, & De Fruyt, 2012; Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, & Goossens, 2014) tend to focus on Big Five traits and do not explicitly examine the complex combinations of these traits reflected in the Dark Triad.

In studies linking the Dark Triad traits to adjustment, the associations of these traits with different subtypes of aggression have been of great interest. Typically, overt or direct types (i.e., open physical or verbal forms) of aggression are distinguished from relational or indirect types (i.e., gossiping, spreading rumors) of aggression (e.g., Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008). There is a considerable literature supporting the distinction between these subtypes of aggression. The divergent validity has, for example, been shown in studies on gender differences. A meta-analysis (Archer, 2004) revealed that boys consistently score higher on measures of direct aggression. Gender differences in indirect aggression are (depending on the method) either non-existent or suggest that girls score slightly higher than boys. A recent study (Tackett, Herzhoff, Reardon, De Clercq, & Sharp, 2014) suggests that these types of aggression are differentially associated with dysfunctional trait domains of Disagreeableness and Emotional Instability and their facets. These results point to the potential role of personality in explaining individual differences in direct and indirect aggression.

Dark Triad traits have also been linked to direct and indirect aggression in previous studies. Psychopathic traits (or conceptually

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