Valuing myself over others: The Dark Triad traits and moral and social values ☆

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ABSTRACT

In samples from America and Germany (N = 1353), we examined how the Dark Triad traits related to different value systems as measured by Moral Foundations and Social Values. Psychopathy was linked to diminished concerns for all Moral Foundations, Machiavellianism was linked to a moral flexibility, and narcissism was linked to a socially desirable form of morality. Machiavellianism and psychopathy scores were associated with a devaluing of collective interests, whereas narcissism was associated with a valuing of individual interests through the value of Self-Enhancement. Individual differences in a variety of values mediated part of the sex differences in the Dark Triad traits. We contend that what makes the Dark Triad traits unique and interesting is that they share a unique complex of values that might run counter to societal expectations for selflessness.

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1. Introduction

The Dark Triad traits are characterized by vanity and self-centeredness (i.e., narcissism), manipulation and cynicism (i.e., Machiavellianism), callous social attitudes and impulsivity (i.e., psychopathy). The traits have implications for counterproductive work behavior (Spain, Harms, & Leberton, 2014), vocational interests (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014), racism (Jonason, 2015; Jones, 2013), self-control/impulsivity (Jonason & Tost, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2011), empathy (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013), and mating (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). One area that has been neglected, that may bear on all these question is that of values. As values may inform much of the things people do, understanding the value system (or systems) associated with the Dark Triad traits might provide unique insight to not only each trait but also to better understand what informs the attitudes and behaviors of those characterized by these traits. In this study, we examine how the Dark Triad traits relate to moral (Study 1–3) and Social Values (Study 3).

The Dark Triad traits are often attributed with a "compromised" or "dysfunctional" morality (Campbell et al., 2009; Glenn, Iyer, Graham, Koleva, & Haidt, 2009). This may be because they value "self" over "other" in a way that violates implicit communal sentiments in people (Jonason & Webster, 2012). The Dark Triad traits may be high in agency but low on communalism (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010) which may result in more harm to others than to oneself (Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). That is, these traits may be interpersonally aversive but personally useful (Kurt & Paulhus, 2008), characterized by values systems that serve the interest of the individual over the group. Our larger goal in this study is to assess the value systems linked to the Dark Triad traits.

In this study we examine values in two ways. First, we examine five moral values (Graham et al., 2011). *Harm* is related to virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance. *Fairness* is related to ideas of justice, rights, and autonomy. *Ingroup* reflects individual differences in loyalty, patriotism, and self-sacrifice towards one's group members. *Authority* includes deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions. *Purity* is related to the psychology of disgust and contamination. Second, we examine two higher-order values and four more specific values (Schwartz, 2003a, 2003b). The former taps the distinction between individual v. collective interests. Those are broken up further in four mid-level values. *Self-transcendence* is a value system related to spirituality. *Conservation* is a value system that is akin to political conservatism and is related

to conformity and security. *Self-enhancement* is a value concerned with personal enjoyment, hedonism, and power. And, *openness to change* is a value systems concerned with social justice and equality.

While a number of attempts have been made to show how the Dark Triad traits can be represented as a single complex (Jonason, Kavanagh, Webster, & Fitzgerald, 2011; Kavanagh, Signal, & Taylor, 2013), the examination of each trait on its own is essential as each trait has unique social perceptions. Examining the Dark Triad composite assumes the traits have the same antecedents and consequents, but generally speaking this is not the case. For instance, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, in particular, are perceived to be socially undesirable, whereas, narcissism is perceived as relatively more socially acceptable (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). As such, we make predictions related to the value systems linked to each trait independently. In terms of moral values, we predict psychopathy to have the most "compromised" morality (Glenn et al., 2009), Machiavellianism to embody a degree of moral flexibility as per its particular strategic social style (Jonason & Webster, 2012), and narcissism to be associated with being relatively moral (Campbell et al., 2009) because being as such may lead to the social approval narcissists so strongly desire (Raskin & Terry, 1988). In terms of social values, we expect psychopathy and Machiavellianism to be associated with valuing collective interests little whereas narcissism may be related to valuing individual interests. The former may be "darker" aspects of human nature (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012); darkness that might be related to their value system running counter to the groups' interests. Narcissism, instead, may push people to merely care about themselves, not necessarily to disregard others interests/needs and this may be seen through the value of Self-Enhancement. Theoretically speaking, these links may be manifestations of the particular approaches to dealing with social and adaptive problems faced by those characterized by these traits.

There are pervasive sex differences in the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013; Jonason et al., 2009) and accounting for them is important because it allows for better understanding of the mechanisms and proximal mediators that make the sexes different, psychologically speaking. What informs these sex differences may be individual differences in values. For instance, as men tend to be less empathetic than women are (Jonason et al., 2013), values related to others suffering (i.e., Harm and Fairness) might facilitate the Dark Triad traits in men. Alternatively, as racism is a function of an ingroup bias and the Dark Triad are related to racism (Jonason, 2015; Jones, 2013), valuing one's ingroup may also facilitate these traits in men. And more generally, in as much as the Dark Triad traits are related to a selfish orientation to the world and social interactions (Jonason et al., 2010), individualistic values may facilitate sex differences in the Dark Triad traits. Together, this would mean that it is not that men and women differ on the Dark Triad traits per se but, instead, that they have different value systems.

In the present studies, we provide new details about the Dark Triad traits as they relate to two system of values: moral and social. We show how underlying sex differences in the traits are sex-differentiated value systems. We contend that what makes the Dark Triad traits so interesting to researchers, the media, and lay-people alike is the value systems collected to them. These values may reflect an orientation to life that does not line up with implicit collectivistic sentiments people have.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we begin to assess the value systems associated with the Dark Triad traits. In this case, we examine how the traits are related to moral values in a sample of MTurk participants. We ensure these relationships are robust to the partialing of the variance associated with the Big Five. And last, we test whether sex differences in the Dark Triad are informed (i.e., mediated) by individual differences in morality to show that what makes men score higher than women is having a different value system than women have.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure
The sample was composed of 585 American participants (46% male), aged 18–76 years old ($M = 33.36$, $SD = 11.58$), who were paid US$2 for their completion of a series of measures on MTurk. The majority of the sample was European American (78%).

2.1.2. Measures
To measure the Dark Triad traits, the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010) was used. Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*) with statements such as: "I tend to want others to admire me" (i.e., narcissism), "I tend to lack remorse" (i.e., psychopathy), and "I have used deceit or lied to get my way" (i.e., Machiavellianism). Items were averaged together to create an index of narcissism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$), Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .81$), and psychopathy ($\alpha = .73$).[1]

The Big Five personality traits were measured with the 20-item IPIP (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006). Each of the five factors is composed of four items asking participants how much (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*) each item describes them. The corresponding items were averaged to create indices of extraversion ($\alpha = .84$), neuroticism ($\alpha = .72$), agreeableness ($\alpha = .74$), conscientiousness ($\alpha = .67$), and openness ($\alpha = .71$).

Individual differences in morality were measured with the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011). It assessed the degree to which participants felt different considerations were relevant (0 = *not at all relevant*; 5 = *extremely relevant*) when making moral decisions and their agreement (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*) with various moral statements. Because items were on different scales, the items were standardized (*z*-scored) before they were averaged to create indices of Harm ($\alpha = .70$), Fairness ($\alpha = .64$), Ingroup ($\alpha = .68$), Purity ($\alpha = .69$), and Authority ($\alpha = .69$).

2.2. Results and discussion

As expected, men scored higher than women did on all the Dark Triad traits (*t*'s = −4.78 to −5.80, *p*'s < .01, Cohen's *d*'s = −0.40 to −0.48) and the moral foundation of Ingroup ($t(583) = -3.02$, $p < .01$, $d = -0.25$). Women scored higher than men did on the moral matrices of Harm and Fairness (*t*'s = 3.09–6.02, *p*'s < .01, *d*'s = 0.26–0.51).

Correlational and multiple regression (controlling for shared variance) results are reported in Table 1 (top panel). Machiavellianism was not uniquely linked to any of the moral matrices, suggesting a moral flexibility. Positive correlations in Fairness, Ingroup, Authority, and Purity with narcissism were met with negative correlations on those same matrices in psychopathy (when considering the regression coefficients). This might reveal the socially sensitive nature of narcissism relative to the socially insensitive nature of psychopathy. Results were generally robust to the

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[1] Machiavellianism was correlated with psychopathy ($r(583) = .60$, $p < .01$) and narcissism ($r(583) = .34$, $p < .01$), and narcissism was correlated with psychopathy ($r(583) = .55$, $p < .01$).