

Who is James Bond?: The Dark Triad as an Agentive Social Style

Peter K. Jonason*

New Mexico State University

Norman P. Li

Singapore Management University

Emily A. Teicher

New Mexico State University

**Peter K. Jonason; Psychology Department; New Mexico State University; PO Box 30001/MSC; 3452 Las Cruces; NM 88003; pjonason@nmsu.edu (email).*

ABSTRACT - If the Dark Triad are costly traits for individuals to have and individuals are predisposed to avoid interacting with selfish individuals, how do those who have those traits extract resources from their environment? We contend that a specific set of personality traits will enable individuals to do so. We showed that those who are disagreeable, extraverted, open, and have high self-esteem along with low levels of neuroticism and conscientiousness score high on the Dark Triad (Study 1: $N = 216$). Additionally, having a more individualistic and competitive approach to others and not a strongly altruistic orientation will also help those who are high on the Dark Triad (Study 2; $N = 336$). We contend that the Dark Triad may represent one social strategy that is characterized by an agentive social style.

The Dark Triad – Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy – is quickly growing to be a popular topic (e.g., Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and has been called a “James Bond psychology” (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2008). Traditionally, narcissism (Bogat, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), psychopathy (Andershed, Gustafson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2002; Hare, 1985), and Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970; Hunter, Gerbing, & Boster, 1982) are considered undesirable personality traits. However, work is now converging on evidence that suggests that these individuals are successful in certain careers like acting (e.g., Young & Pinsky, 2006) and successful in their sexual lives (Jonason et al., 2009). The primary question we are concerned with is what particular constellation of personality traits and behaviors enable those high on the Dark Triad to maneuver themselves into relationships with others and take advantages of others?

Exploitation is likely a difficult and risky strategy that often results in failure because people tend to be guarded against exploitation and are inclined to retaliate against it (Cummins, 1999; Shinada, Yamagishi, & Ohmura, 2004). Thus, we hypothesize that a specific set of personality traits may be required to persistently pursue a highly selfish

agenda. High levels of extraversion, openness, and self-esteem, coupled with low levels of conscientiousness and anxiety may better suit an agentic person who repeatedly attempts to extract resources from conspecifics. Disagreeableness may predispose people to not valuing others much which may facilitate the pursuit of selfish ends. Therefore, we will replicate prior work between the Dark Triad and the Big Five (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and extend it to include a global measure of self-esteem, despite the inconsistent correlations between and within parts of the Dark Triad and self-esteem (Hunter et al., 1982; Fernandez & Marshall, 2003; Gustafson & Ritzer, 1995; Raskin et al., 1991). Having high levels of self-esteem should provide resilience in light of repeated failures which are likely when attempting to exploit others.

For one who is characterized by high levels of the Dark Triad, getting what one wants may also be facilitated by the adoption of a more self-centered or agentic position when dealing with conspecifics. Therefore, we expect that persons who score high on the Dark Triad should report low scores on prosocialness and high scores on competitiveness and individualism. Consistent with this, those with a competitive or individualistic social value orientation are less likely to help other people than those classified as prosocial (McClintock & Allison, 2006). Similarly, those high on the Dark Triad tend to be low in empathy (e.g., Wolfson, 1981).

Study 1

In Study 1 we are concerned with how individuals who have such negative traits as those high on the Dark Triad, might be able to extract resources from their environment. We contend that a certain complex of the Big Five and self-esteem will be instrumental towards this end. Therefore, in this study we replicate and extend prior work on the Dark Triad.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Two hundred and sixteen upper division and weekend-course psychology students (37% men, 63% women) aged 18 – 57 years ($M = 22.51$, $SD = 5.70$) from the Southwestern U.S. received extra credit for filling out the surveys described below. Packets were completed in a classroom with at least one empty seat between students. Once they completed the measures, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Measures

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory, a validated and widely used measure (Raskin & Terry, 1988). For each item, participants chose one of two statements that they felt applied to them more. One of the two statements reflected a narcissistic attitude (e.g., “I have a natural talent for influencing people”), whereas the other statement did not (e.g., “I am not good at influencing people”). We summed the total number of narcissistic statements the participants endorsed as an index of narcissism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$).

The 31-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus, Hemphill, & Hare, in press) was used to assess nonclinical psychopathy. Participants rated how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as: “I enjoy driving at high

speeds” and “I think I could beat a lie detector.” Items were averaged to create an index of psychopathy ($\alpha = .76$).

Machiavellianism was measured with the 20-item MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as: “It is hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there” and “People suffering from incurable diseases should have the choice of being put painlessly to death.” The items were averaged to create a Machiavellianism index ($\alpha = .65$).

We conducted a principal components analysis on all three Dark Triad measures. All three loaded well ($> .74$) on a single factor that accounted for 53.09% of the variance among the items (Eigen > 1.59). Thus, we standardized (*z*-scored) overall scores on each measure and then averaged all three together to create a composite Dark Triad score (Jonason et al., 2009).

Global self-esteem was measured with Rosenberg’s Self-esteem Scale (1965). Statements included: “I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis of others” and “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” The ten items were averaged to create an index of self-esteem ($\alpha = .81$).

To assess the Big Five, we used the BFI (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998). Five factors were detected: extraversion ($\alpha = .74$), neuroticism ($\alpha = .78$), openness ($\alpha = .77$), conscientious ($\alpha = .79$), and agreeableness ($\alpha = .81$).

Results and Discussion

As presented in Table 1, the Dark Triad composite was positively correlated with extraversion, openness, and self-esteem, and negatively correlated with agreeableness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness. Only the correlation between extraversion and Machiavellianism was moderated by sex. The correlation was localized in men ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and not strong in women ($r = -.14$; Fisher’s $z = 2.85$, $p < .01$).¹ Thus, results are consistent with the possibility that the Dark Triad traits reflect a highly selfish social strategy. High levels of self-esteem, extraversion, and openness, along with low levels of conscientiousness and anxiety, may be instrumental in enabling an exploiter to persist in the face of potential social rejection and retaliation.

Table 1
Correlations Between the Dark Triad, the Big Five, and Self-Esteem

	Psychopathy	Machiavellianism	Narcissism	Dark Triad
Extraversion	.17*	.04	.37**	.26**
Neuroticism	-.02	.10	-.15*	-.30**
Agreeableness	-.18*	-.15*	-.17*	-.43**
Openness	.21**	.00	.23**	.18**
Conscientiousness	-.14*	-.22*	.01	-.40**
Self-esteem	.03	.01	.18*	.65**

Note: $N = 216$; * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

¹ A full correlation matrix, by the sex of the participant can be obtained by contacting the first author. It is omitted here to save space.

Study 2

In Study 2, we assess how social strategies related to scores on the Dark Triad. If those high on the Dark Triad have an agentic social style, we would expect them to be more individualistic and competitive than those who are lower on the Dark Triad. Conversely, we expect that those high on the Dark Triad should not be particularly altruistic or prosocial.

Participants and Procedures

Three hundred-thirty six volunteers (34% men, 66% women) aged 18 – 63 years ($M = 26.65$, $SD = 9.90$) from unique IP addresses completed an online survey that informed them of the nature of the study, asked demographic questions, and asked them to respond to the self-report items described below. Upon completion, the participants were debriefed and thanked.

Measures

The same measures of the Dark Triad as above were used in the same manner. We summed the total number of narcissistic statements the participants endorsed to measure overall narcissism ($\alpha = .87$). The items measuring psychopathy were averaged to create an index ($\alpha = .74$). The items measuring Machiavellianism were averaged to create an index ($\alpha = .57$). We also treated the three Dark Triad measures as a composite measure. In a principal components analysis, all three dimensions loaded well ($> .54$) on a single factor that accounted for 53.46% of the variance among the items (Eigen > 1.60).

We assessed self-reported altruism with a 20-item measure (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981). Participants were asked how often they do various behaviors on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *more than once*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *very often*). Sample statements are: (1) I have helped push a stranger's car out of the snow and (2) I have given directions to a stranger. These items were averaged together to create an index of self-reported altruism ($\alpha = .92$).

Last, we assessed social value orientation (Au & Kwong, 2001). Participants were asked to allocate dollar amounts to themselves and another across nine scenarios. Below is an example of what one of these allocation questions look like.

	A	B	C
You get	500	500	550
Other gets	100	500	300

Individuals choices then reflect not only what they want but what they want a hypothetical other to get, therefore the measure is considered to assess social strategies. Based on the allocation patterns, three typologies could be identified: prosocial, competitor, and individualist. Those who did not fit within one of these typologies were labeled as “unclassifiable.” In addition to this categorization, we also derived continuous measures for prosociality, competitiveness, and individuality by counting the number of responses corresponding to each style.

Results and Discussion

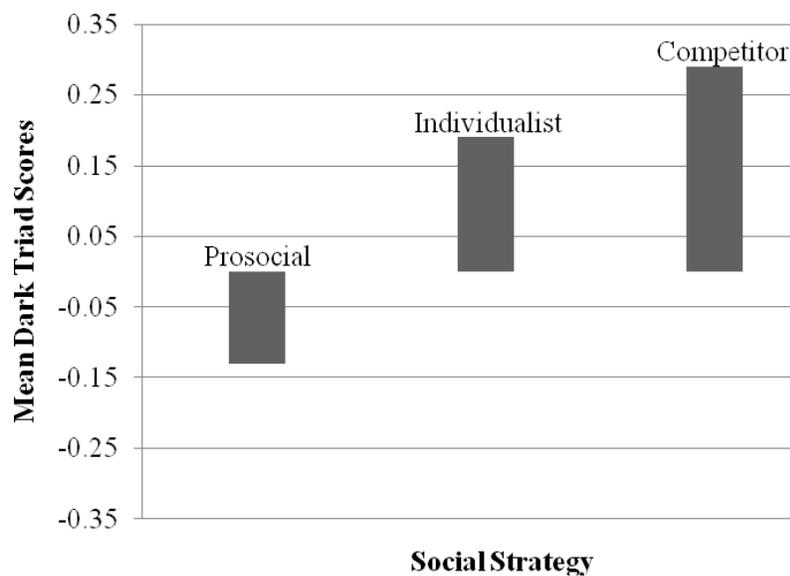
As reported in Table 2, the Dark Triad traits were not related to altruism, save the weak correlation with Machiavellianism. The Dark Triad was negatively correlated with prosociality and positively correlated with individuality and competitiveness. When we ran these correlations by the sex of the participant none of the correlations differed significantly.²

Table 2
Correlations Among the Dark Triad and Measures of Prosociality

	Psychopathy	Machiavellianism	Narcissism	Dark Triad
Self-reported altruism	.03	.14**	-.06	.05
Prosocialness	-.20**	-.17**	-.20**	-.20**
Individualness	.19**	.12*	.16**	.43**
Competitiveness	.10	.13*	.10	.18**

Note: $N = 336$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Figure 1
Rates of Dark Triad Scores by Social Value Orientation Typologies



Note: The unclassifiable participants were excluded in the figure.

Participants were also classified into prosocial ($n = 200$), individualistic ($n = 76$), competitor ($n = 33$), and unclassifiable ($n = 20$) styles. In a 2 (participant's sex) x 4

² A full correlation matrix, by the sex of the participant can be obtained by contacting the first author. It is omitted here to save space.

(SVO) ANOVA, there were two main effects and no interactions on the Dark Triad composite. Consistent with prior work, men ($M = 0.29$) scored higher than women ($M = 0.00$) on the Dark Triad ($F(1, 334) = 5.69, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$). As Figure 1 shows, Dark Triad scores differed across social value orientation ($F(3, 330) = 3.90, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .04$). They were significantly lower for those classified as prosocial than individualist or competitor. Although we replicated rates of the three typologies (Au & Kwong, 2001), the unbalanced cell sizes make our results tentative at best. Results were somewhat consistent with the possibility the Dark Triad traits reflect an exploitative, self-serving strategy which involves being individualistic and competitive, but not necessarily unaltruistic or prosocial.

General Discussion

We were interested in how do those characterized as possessing high level of the Dark Triad extract resources from their environments despite people's tendency to guard against and punish freeriders (e.g., Cummins, 1999). We hypothesized that a specific set of personality traits would be instrumental to this end. In Study 1, we showed that those high on the Dark Triad are characterized by the sociality, openness, and risk-handling abilities that facilitate an exploitative social strategy. In Study 2, we found that those high on the Dark Triad were individualistic and competitive but not particularly altruistic or prosocial. Taken together, results paint a picture of how those high on the Dark Triad deal with others via their personality traits and social strategies.

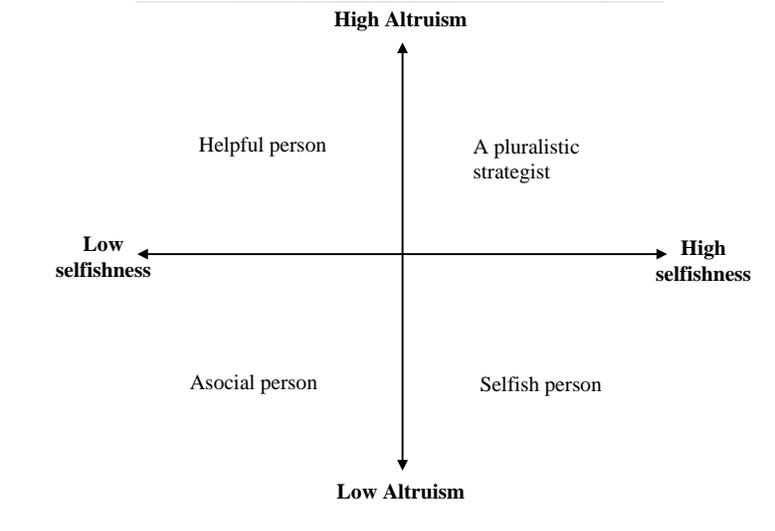
The Dark Triad as an Agentic Social Style

The Dark Triad traits have been traditionally considered negative. However, a growing body of literature is emerging that argues that despite the costs of being characterized as narcissistic, Machiavellian, or psychopathic, individuals might actually be able to extract what they want from their environment via an exploitive or agentic social style. Our study suggests that there might be at least two social strategies: one agentic, measured by the Dark Triad, and one prosocial, measured with altruistic behavior, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Based on prior research (e.g., Hawley, 1999) it seems likely that these two strategies may be orthogonal, and may better suit individuals to extract resources from their environment. We tentatively present a model of these two social strategies in Figure 2. Therefore, as with mating strategies (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 2000), life strategies may also take pluralistic forms. Indeed, it is possible that mating strategies are a subset of social strategies: a short-term mating strategy may reflect a selfish, agentic social orientation, whereas a long-term mating style is more in line with an altruistic, cooperative orientation.

Whether or not the model in Figure 2 is correct is up for debate, but an important consideration is how these traits manifest themselves. It is possible that while people are inclined to utilize one strategy versus the other, individuals may have both social strategies at their disposal (Hawley, 1999), and the adoption of each strategy depends on the situation and individual trigger points. Such a position has been advocated by those interested in adaptive individual differences (e.g., Buss, 1999) and trait activation theory (e.g., Lievens, Chasteen, Day, & Christensen, 2006). In fact, numerous factors, including

psychosocial, environmental, genetic, and neurochemical (Holmes, Slaughter, & Kashani, 2001), have been identified as “risk factors” for antisocial personality disorders.

Figure 2
A Pluralistic View of Social Strategies



Limitations and Conclusions

The studies are not without limitations. First, the correlational nature of the data constrains the interpretability of the two studies. Second, because measures of altruism are focused on acts and not underlying motivations, our claims need further attention. There may be different underlying motivations for apparently selfless or selfish acts. This may not be a criticism confined to this study but, instead, the entire approach of using acts to reveal personality (e.g., Buss & Craik, 1980).

Third, the Mach IV measure has been shown to be problematic, perhaps because of social desirability response biases (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). This may account for some of the low levels of internal consistency we found, although these levels were acceptable for basic research (Schmitt, 1996). In contrast, narcissism may be positively correlated with social desirability (Auerbach, 1984; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984). Evidence suggests that the Dark Triad composite, which simultaneously measures all three traits, might lessen such concerns because a single scale eliminates the possibility that different scales have different response biases, in as much as the correlations are larger for the composite than for the components.

In a world where individuals want to avoid being taken advantage of, those high on the Dark Triad, like James Bond, who tend to be more agentic than others, have a particularly difficult task at hand. How to get what they want without rousing the suspicions or retaliations of others? The answer is to be extraverted, open, high on self-

esteem, and low on conscientiousness and anxiety while being individualistic and competitive.

Author Note

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