

# The Antihero in Popular Culture: Life History Theory and the Dark Triad Personality Traits

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The Dark Triad of personality is composed of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Despite the common belief that these traits are undesirable, the media is awash with characters that embody the Dark Triad. Characters like Gregory House, M.D., Batman (a.k.a. the Dark Knight), and James Bond all embody these traits and are some of the most popular media franchises today. As entertaining as these characters are, they provide us with a window into the dark side of human nature. Instead of treating the dark side of human nature as inherently maladaptive, we provide an alternative view that, despite their costs, traits like these can confer reproductive and survival benefits for the individual. In so doing, we review the research on the Dark Triad traits and provide a theoretical account for how these traits can confer some positive benefits. To facilitate comprehension, we provide examples taken from the media to show how evolutionary psychology and popular culture intersect.

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The Dark Triad, composed of subclinical narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, has become an increasingly popular constellation of traits (see Figure 1). Individuals who embody these traits can be seen through fictional and nonfictional media. In this review, we utilize examples from the media to provide a coherent framework to understand the Dark Triad and to demonstrate that despite what one might believe (or want to believe), people who embody these traits are all around us. Such a review will provide insight to both researchers trying to wrap their head around these apparently maladaptive traits and laypeople who want to understand the appeal of “bad boys,” cads, and other misanthropes.

The three traits are moderately intercorrelated (Fehr, Samson, & Paulhus, 1992; Gustafson & Ritzer, 1995; McHoskey, 1995; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and linked by disagreeableness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), dishonesty (Lee & Ashton, 2005), aggressiveness (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2010), and a number of indicators of a short-term mating style (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010b; Jonason, Li, Webster, &

Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Valentine, Li, & Harbeson, 2011). Not surprisingly, these traits have repeatedly been seen as part of the dark side of human nature (Kowalski, 2001; Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

In contrast, we contend that those who take a “negative” view of the Dark Triad traits implicitly take a Group Selection approach (Ardrey, 1970), a theory with little support and few advocates today. Instead, these traits may be solely—or selfishly—optimal for the individual in the context of their life (Dawkins, 1978). That is, despite the social or even personal costs to an individual, Dark Triad traits could be maintained in the population if some positive fitness benefit is accrued (Mealey, 1995). As Buss (2009) suggests,

what is often disparaged as a maladaptive personality marked by impulsivity and lack of self-control instead can be conceptualized within life history theory as an adaptive stable strategy deployed in response to a realistic appraisal of a shorter time horizon (p. 361; see also Daly & Wilson, 2005).

For many years, individuals who have embodied these traits have garnered popularity in literature and the media by more common names like antiheroes (i.e., a protagonist whose character is conspicuously contrary to an archetypal hero), Byronic (i.e., Lord Byron) heroes, or dark heroes (Kruger, Fisher, & Jobling, 2003). One of the most famous antiheroes is James Bond. James Bond is the creation of novelist Ian Fleming. Although James Bond has ostensibly operated with the (loose) sanctioning of the British government, he frequently operates outside the law (e.g., *License to Kill* and *Quantum of Solace*). The codified laws that apply to the rest of society like “do not murder” do not apply to him; he has a license to kill. Even implicit laws like “do not

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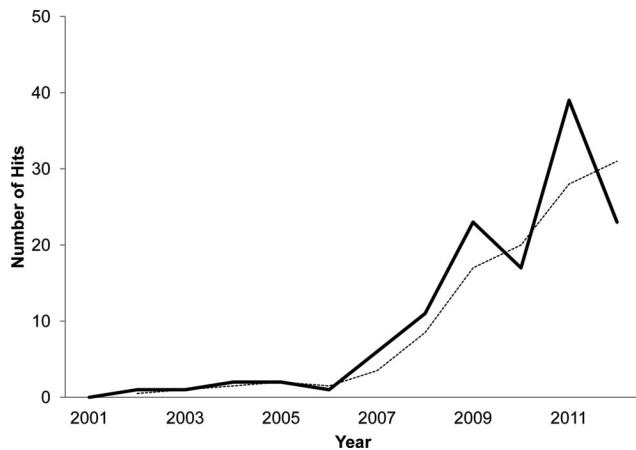


Figure 1. Number ( $N = 247$ ) of hits (solid line) and a trend line (dashed line) in a Google Scholar search for the terms, “Dark Triad,” “narcissism,” “psychopathy,” and “Machiavellianism.” Only cases where all four terms were included in the hit are included here. Citations were excluded. Search performed May 22, 2011.

manipulate others” are part of James Bond’s repertoire of tactics to fulfill his missions. Although each actor who played this character has a slightly different take on the character of James Bond, a number of shared features, consistent with the Dark Triad, link the depictions. James Bond has a killer instinct; he has a psychological disposition that allows him to kill others with a gun or by hand. Psychopathy likely underlies this ability. That is, having cold, uncaring attitudes toward others and limited empathy likely facilitates interpersonal aggression. James Bond has a relationship style that revolves around short-term trysts and mate-poaching. For instance, in *Casino Royale*, James Bond (played by Daniel Craig) says to Vesper Lynd that she is not his type. She asks if it is because she is smart. He says no, it is because she is single. He reliably charms his way into the beds of women, the favors of American spies (e.g., Felix Lighter), and even the various nemeses James Bond faces. For instance, in *Man with the Golden Gun*, James Bond (played by Roger Moore) literally sits down and has dinner with the villain Scaramanga (played by Christopher Lee). Indeed, this villain is particularly telling. He says to James Bond that he (an assassin) and James Bond are the same. James Bond objects and says that when he kills it is by order of his government and those he kills are killers themselves. There are many more antiheroes (e.g., Batman, Dexter, Gregory House) that we describe in the sections below.

### The Dark Triad and Life History Theory

Despite the recent flurry of scientific interest in the Dark Triad, it has a substantial limitation. The work on the Dark Triad tends to be descriptive in nature (e.g., Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The extant theoretical work suggests that the Dark Triad may indicate a fast life strategy based on immediate rewards and gratification (Figueredo et al., 2005, 2006; Gladden, Figueredo, & Jacobs, 2009; Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010a; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010c; Jonason et al., 2010b; Jonason et al., 2009, 2011; Jonason & Tost, 2010; Troisi, 2005). Life History Theory (e.g., Wilson, 1975) is a midlevel theory derived from evo-

lutionary theory. It describes differences in the amount of bioenergetic and material resources allocated for somatic effort (i.e., resources devoted to continued survival) and reproductive effort (i.e., resources devoted to mating, parenting, or both). For instance, some animals like rodents, fish, or insects reproduce in a way where they invest little in individual offspring but, instead, try to create many progeny “hoping” that, on average, selection will not eliminate all of them. Other species like apes, elephants, and dolphins have an alternative approach, investing heavily in a small number of offspring. Those with the former strategy tend to be of a smaller body size and mature quickly, whereas those who use the latter strategy tend to have a protracted prereproductive period marked by learning. Although researchers originally used life history theory to account for species-level differences, this theory has proved useful in understanding within-species differences in nonhuman and humans alike (for a review see Rushton, 1985, 1995). In humans, we refer to systematic, within-species differences as personality traits or individual differences.

Life history theorists propose that the developmental trajectories of organisms—and their reactions to key social and environmental events—are shaped by natural selection to produce an optimal number of viable offspring (Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009; Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005; Rushton, 1985, 1995; Thornhill & Palmer, 2004). That is, reproductive effort and timing is affected by key factors (e.g., available resources, social conditions), and individual differences reflect these factors in what are called life history strategies. The simplest way to conceive of the distinction is that individuals have relatively fast or slow life strategies; the adoption of these strategies is sensitive to factors like parental abuse or lack of resources during childhood (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Figueredo et al., 2006). Antiheroes are characterized by a relatively fast life strategy. Bruce Wayne became Batman in response to witnessing his parents being mugged and killed in an alley. This is seen in both Tim Burton’s *Batman* and Chris Nolan’s *Batman Begins*. As would be predicted by life history theory, Batman is aggressive in his dealings with criminals, antisocial in his interactions with others (with rare exceptions for Alfred his butler and potential love interests), and feels that he is special and entitled (e.g., he believes the rules do not apply to him regarding his vigilantism).

### The Dark Triad Traits

The idea that the Dark Triad traits reflect the same underlying latent disposition is not without criticism (Jones & Paulhus, 2009, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). For instance, the Dark Triad traits are correlated with different social styles (Jones & Paulhus, 2010) and different forms of impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). Although we contend the Dark Triad traits have their own unique behaviors, attitudes, and dispositions, we also contend that all three are imperfect indicators of the same latent disposition. To address this, we discuss the origins of each trait, some of the numerous interpersonal and intrapersonal correlates of each trait, and how each trait is unique.

### Narcissism

The study of narcissism as a personality trait has a long history that predates even Freud who might be the first person to treat psychology as its own scientific field. The term is derived from the myth of

Narcissus, who, according to legend, fell in love with his own image in a reflecting pool. So moved was Narcissus by his own reflection that he did not eat, drink, or sleep, resulting in his demise. Today, the term narcissism often refers to a psychological personality disorder in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (*DSM-IV*) or a subclinical version of the trait, which is often studied by personality and social psychologists (e.g., Paulhus, 2001) and is comprised of grandiosity, need for admiration, lack of empathy, a sense of entitlement, and self-admiration.

A great deal of research has been done on narcissism. Because we do not have space to review all of the correlates of narcissism here, we refer interested readers to a recently published handbook on narcissism research (Campbell & Miller, 2011). Some of the more interesting correlates include aggression (e.g., Webster, Kirkpatrick, Nezlek, Smith, & Paddock, 2007; but especially following provocation, e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), impulsivity (e.g., Vazire & Funder, 2006), defecting or cheating in economic games (e.g., tragedy of the commons; Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005), and having more sex partners (e.g., Jonason et al., 2009). All of these are consistent with our life history approach to narcissism and the other Dark Triad traits.

Although it clearly shares some overlap with both Machiavellianism and psychopathy, narcissism's unique contribution of to the Dark Triad may lie in people's sense of entitlement or superiority to others. Narcissists do not just feel good about themselves—they feel that they are inherently better and more deserving of the respect and admiration of those around them. Recently, researchers have pioneered different types or styles of narcissism, such as *grandiose* narcissism (i.e., individuals who like to show off and draw attention to themselves) and *vulnerable* or *fragile* narcissism (i.e., individuals whose self-image is tied to external feedback; e.g., Miller et al., 2010; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). Another possibility is that narcissism may be a milder trait, whereas the other two Dark Triad traits are correlated with more antisocial outcomes. For example, correlations between narcissism and antisocial outcomes may be a function of not controlling for the shared variance of Machiavellianism and psychopathy.

One cannot help but be confronted with the large number of apparent narcissists in the world and especially in the media. James Bond is just one example of narcissism in the media. In every movie, James Bond dresses impeccably well, typically wearing watches from the expensive ( $\approx$ US\$5,000) brand Omega and tailored suits and tuxedos. He drives around in flashy Aston Martins or BMWs that are often modified to be invisible (*Die Another Day*) or to shoot anti-aircraft missiles (*The World is Not Enough*). Despite scuffs with villains, James Bond always has perfect hair, and when his tie is disheveled from fighting, he knocks the bad guy off a roof and walks off as he fixes his tie (*From Russia with Love*, *Quantum of Solace*).

## Psychopathy

Psychologists define psychopathy as a particular constellation of antisocial behaviors and emotions, including shallow affect, low remorse, low fear, low empathy, egocentrism, exploitativeness, manipulativeness, impulsivity, aggression, and criminality (Cleckley, 1964; Hare, 1993). Much like the psychological construct of narcissism, psychopathy has been extensively studied by both clinical and personality psychologists. Generally, researchers believe there are two

factors of psychopathy. The first factor is called *primary* or instrumental psychopathy. This factor contains the shallow affect, low empathy, and interpersonal coldness facets of psychopathy, and individuals with profound levels of these traits are sometimes referred to as “emotionally stable” psychopaths. The second factor is *secondary* or hostile/reactive psychopathy. This factor is composed of the socially manipulative and deviant facets of psychopathy and has been variously referred to as aggressive, impulsive, and neurotic psychopathy (see Falkenbach, Poythress, Falki, & Manchak, 2007; Hicks, Markon, Patrick, Krueger, & Newman, 2004; Lykken, 2006).

Psychopathy has demonstrated several important interpersonal and intrapersonal correlates. Psychopaths tend to score relatively low on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. Psychopaths also score higher than nonpsychopaths on extraversion and openness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Psychopathy has several associations with romantic relationship functioning, including positive correlations with sexual assault, intimate partner violence, infidelity, and mate-poaching (Brown & Forth, 1997; Jonason et al., 2010b).

Psychopathy is strikingly different from the other Dark Triad traits in terms of the degree to which men and women differ on the trait. Whereas narcissism and Machiavellianism display small to negligible sex differences in most studies (Jonason et al., 2010b; Jonason et al., 2009), sex differences in psychopathy are nearly universal and are moderate to large in size (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002). This may be related to a combination of hormones like cortisol and testosterone (Stålenheim, Eriksson, von Knorring, & Wide, 1998; van Honk & Schutter, 2006), and that it is primarily a functional trait within human males (Jonason et al., 2009, 2011; Mealey, 1995). Some evidence supports this proposal; for example, men tend to be more sensitive to environmental cues involving antisociality (Mealey, 1995; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001), and psychopathy covaries within and across cultures with fast life history traits in men (Schmitt, 2011).

We might point to two examples of psychopaths in the media, one who is an antihero and one who is not. Hannibal Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins) is no antihero. Instead, he is a proper psychopath. He is the villain in the movies with the exception of *Hannibal Rising*, where we learn of his (in this case played by Gaspard Ulliel) disturbing childhood and how he went about getting revenge for the rape and cannibalistic death of his sister. In fact, this movie may humanize the Hannibal Lecter character, very nearly justifying or excusing his bad behavior in the other movies in the mind of some viewers. In contrast, Dexter (played by Michael C. Hall) is an antihero. It is true he kills others like Hannibal but the popular, antihero appeal of the show *Dexter* is that he kills those who arguably deserve to be killed. In this way, Dexter is an antihero like James Bond and Batman, one we as a society are willing to tolerate and even cheer for because he takes risks to kill undesirable members of society. In this way, antihero characters may be popular and real-life people who are high on the Dark Triad traits may be granted special privilege and tolerance because they do something positive for the group.

## Machiavellianism

Five hundred years ago in *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 1532/2004), Italian diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli outlined strategies that a new prince could use to establish and maintain political power. The strat-

egies, highly pragmatic and devoid of traditional social virtues, eventually became associated with an opportunistic and deceptive “Machiavellian” personality. Various psychologists have studied this trait over the years. Although somewhat related to narcissism and psychopathy, Machiavellianism is also a distinct trait (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Whereas narcissism involves excessive self-aggrandizement and psychopathy involves an antisocial nature lacking in empathic concern, Machiavellianism is characterized by a manipulative, self-serving social strategy with three main components: cynicism, manipulateness, and a view that the ends justify the means (Gunnthorsdottir, McCabe, & Smith, 2002).

Psychologists Christie and Geis studied Machiavellianism in the late 1960s and developed scales to differentiate between “low Machs” and “high Machs” (Christie & Geis, 1970). In laboratory settings, high Machs use exploitative tactics (e.g., Harrell, 1980; Vecchio & Sussmann, 1991). In trust games, those scoring high on Machiavellianism follow rational strategies maximizing self-interest more than those scoring low on Machiavellianism. High Machs prioritize competition and winning at all costs (Ryckman, Thornton, & Butler, 1994), while placing low value on community and family (McHoskey, 1999).

Machiavellianism is negatively correlated with agreeableness and conscientiousness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and positively correlated with self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) and with a strong sense of personal control (Fehr et al., 1992). Machiavellian individuals tend to use persuasion, self-disclosure (Liu, 2008), and ingratiation to get their way (Fehr et al., 1992). High Machs may be more willing to betray others when the others cannot retaliate (Gunnthorsdottir, McCabe, & Smith, 2002), subscribe to lower ethical standards (Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1991), or self-report being more inclined to behave unethically (Jones & Kavanagh, 1996) like telling more lies (Ghosh & Crain, 1995; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996; Sakalaki, Richardson, & Thepaut, 2007) than low Machs do.

Although conceptualized as a form of social intelligence, Machiavellianism has generally not been found to be correlated with measures of intelligence (Paulhus, & Williams, 2002) and has actually been found to be negatively correlated with emotional intelligence (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007; Barlow, Qualter, & Stylianou, 2010). In the workplace, however, one study found a positive correlation between Machiavellianism and income, but only for highly educated men; the correlation was negative among uneducated men (Turner & Martinez, 1977). More generally, high Machs tend to do well in unstructured working environments where there is less managerial supervision and more autonomy (Shultz, 1993). In highly structured organizations, high Machs tend to perform worse than low Machs (Sparks, 1994).

In romantic relationships, high Machs tend to utilize deceptive and coercive tactics (McHoskey, 2001). Machiavellianism tends to be stronger in men than it is in women, positively correlated with age (Christie & Geis, 1970), and is similarly related to measures of promiscuousness (Jonason et al., 2009). All three of these converge on the possibility that Machiavellianism may reflect an adaptive short-term sexual strategy (Jonason et al., 2010b; Jonason et al., 2009). More generally, Machiavellianism—or Machiavellianism intelligence (Byrne & Whiten, 1988)—may have evolved as an exploitative short-term oriented social strategy. Such a strategy would work as long as there are non-Machiavellian individuals to exploit (Mealey, 1995) and the same individuals are not repeatedly encountered

(Figueredo et al., 2005). Indeed, some evidence exists for both genetic and environmental causes of the Dark Triad traits; with near 70% of the variability in Machiavellianism accounted for by genetic factors (e.g., Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008).

It may be that factors like high testosterone and Machiavellian intelligence facilitate James Bond, Dexter, and House to manipulate others. Fans of *House, M.D.* (created by David Shore) will note that in nearly every episode Gregory House (played by Hugh Laurie) pokes and prods his coworkers and employees, as well as bends the arms of his patients, to consent to some risky medical procedure. Audiences forgive House because he is usually correct, saving people’s lives. As head of his own department, he is able to exercise dictatorial control over his employees and because he saves people from the brink of death, his boss tolerates—and might even enable—his bad behavior.

### Antiheroes and the Dark Triad

Although we mentioned some examples of the antiheroes above, we felt it necessary to provide more detail on some other notable examples to make our point about the ubiquitous nature of these Dark Triad individuals. Although our list of examples is by no means exhaustive, we contend it need not be so; once you know what to look for, you may see these Dark Triad individuals everywhere in TV shows, movies, graphic novels, politics, at work, and just maybe, sitting across from you at dinner.

Note that most of our examples are of men. Although women can score high on the Dark Triad traits, they often suffer more serious consequences than men do for pursuing a fast life strategy. For instance, pursuing a violent approach to life is more problematic for women than for men in that women are smaller in stature. Alternatively, women who pursue a fast mating strategy may have to raise unwanted offspring without the help of committed males (Trivers, 1972). Female antiheroes are much less common in the media. This may be because society treats the antihero role as male-specific. Female characters may more commonly conform to the stereotypical female gender roles of nurturance, caring, and compassion. It seems possible that if female characters violate these roles, the associated movies will not make it to mainstream audiences. It is possible there are female examples of antiheroes, and we cannot claim to be aware of every character in popular media.

### Art Imitating Life

The Dark Triad traits exist in individuals in reality and it is not unreasonable to expect that this should be reflected in different forms of media today. Popular culture can be seen in movies and TV. In the recent film adaptations of *Iron Man*, Robert Downey Jr.’s portrayal of Tony Stark stands out from other Marvel Comics heroes as a “likable asshole.” Despite his claims that he is “not the hero type,” Tony Stark is generally seen as a hero—albeit one with little modesty (narcissism) or concern for the morality (psychopathy) of building and making a profit from deadly military weapons. There are numerous fantastical examples of antiheroes in movies. They share numerous features. These features are linked by a coherent life history strategy, as evidenced in the Dark Triad traits.

One might say that superheroes are fantastical and thus may not reflect reality. Although this criticism is valid, less fantastical examples of individuals with the Dark Triad traits also exist in



film. One of the most critically acclaimed film series of all time is *The Godfather*. Interestingly, the protagonist of both films is the antihero head of an organized crime family named Michael Corleone. Although Michael begins the films showing virtually no signs of the Dark Triad traits, his increased involvement in the “family business” (e.g., extortion, racketeering, murder) gradually brings out these traits. Over time, Michael develops the ability to manipulate not only those who work for him, but also his closest family members into doing his bidding. In addition to being a Machiavellian, Michael occasionally shows callous disregard—a sign of psychopathy—for the lives of those closest to him, culminating in him ordering the murders of both his brother and brother-in-law. Michael also shows signs of narcissism in that he sees himself as the only one who can lead his family, and he views the Corleone crime family as superior to other crime families. Despite these character flaws, he is seen as the hero of the films—a strong defender of himself, his family, and their collective interests. Although he does not defend codified laws like James Bond, he protects his family at all cost, a virtue espoused almost universally.

In addition to film, characters with high Dark Triad traits are prominent on TV. Stephen Colbert is the sole host of a spinoff of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. In his show, *The Colbert Report*, Colbert portrays a satirical, hypertrophied version of an American Republican. He repeatedly tries to show-up his guests. For instance, he uses his considerable wit to try to counterargue the points of his guests. When he makes a point—often an absurdly tangential one—he claims victory in the argument saying, “check-mate.” Of course, some of Colbert’s appeal is that he is mocking these characteristics. This has recently escalated to the point that he has created a political action committee, setting himself up to influence public opinion even further.

One might be surprised to hear that the appeal of these traits can be traced back to some classic novels. There is considerable work examining the life history strategies in literature (see Kruger, Fisher, & Jobling, 2003). We will not review that here, but instead, point to one character as an example. In Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862/1982), there is a character named Monsieur Thénardier. He is a scoundrel. As an innkeeper, he tries to swindle people out of as much money as he can. For instance, in the play, he sings about how he “charges them for the mice, extra for the lice, two percent for looking in the window twice.” The title of the song even further reveals his Dark Triad traits, “Master of the House.” Later in the story, he and his wife, Madame Thenardier, have come into money, and they are at a posh party dressed in true narcissistic fashion in rather ostentatious clothing, in some way advertising their “new money.” We also learn he is effectively an imposter from the song his wife sings; “he thinks he is quite a lover but there is not much there.” Although Jean Valjean is the primary hero in this story and has considerable appeal, anyone who has seen this play knows that the audience cheers for the Master of the House.

Alternatively, an even more cartoonish (pun intended) figure can be seen in Bender, a lovable but totally corrupt robot on *Futurama* (created by Matt Groening and David Cohen). Bender is overly sure of himself (“I’m the greatest!”) and his self-centered, guiltless attitude is usually the source of humor. For example, in one exchange, another character tells Bender not to blame himself for their predicament. Bender responds, “I don’t blame myself. I blame all of you!” His friend asks how Bender could possibly blame them, and Bender responds, “It ain’t easy, it just proves how

great I am.” Much of the stories surround the high jinx Bender creates by his impulsive, selfish, and even criminal behavior. In one episode, he adopts a number of orphans in order to defraud the government out of welfare payments. When he learns the children cost more than the welfare payments, he quickly tries to sell the orphans at discount prices. Like in the case of Stephen Colbert, what is funny about Bender is his unabashed fast life strategy.

Gregory House, from the TV medical drama *House, M.D.*, also appears to be high in the Dark Triad traits, though his motives are often hidden by his intellectualism. He often justifies his lack of concern for his patients by pointing out that the ends (curing the patient) is what should ultimately matter. He shows a life history strategy consistent with what we know about the Dark Triad. He is a regular customer of prostitutes, fails to uphold his long-term relationship with Cuddy (who is also his boss), abuses prescription medication (Vicodin), takes risks (jumping from his hotel balcony into a pool), and rides a motorcycle to work, despite a bad leg that requires the use of a cane. Despite his flaws (e.g., his closest friends and coworkers call him “smug” and a “manipulative bastard”), the best and the brightest people want to work with him. The show’s success is a testament to the appeal of a man who is, essentially, a jerk. In our minds, this is one of the earliest shows that capitalized on antihero appeal. Other programs have followed like *Lie to Me*, which portrays Cal Lightman as a misanthropic, risk-taking, ex-“operator,” and human lie-detector (who better to detect lies than a liar?).

There is even evidence of this trend outside of Western culture, such as the character Prince Vegeta from the Japanese manga-turned-anime *Dragonball Z*. Prince Vegeta is clearly high in all three characteristics of the Dark Triad traits and is one of the most popular characters from the series. Despite abandoning an “evil” past to work with the heroes from time to time, Prince Vegeta never shows concern with the morality of killing or taking from others. Above all else, he is known for being extremely prideful and narcissistic. At one point in the series, Prince Vegeta begins to fear he’s grown soft—as a result, he manipulates a complex chain of events, even killing a stadium full of people, in order to force the main protagonist to fight him (so that Prince Vegeta can finally demonstrate his superiority). Because of some complicated story elements, his actions put the entire universe at risk—but Prince Vegeta shows no concern whatsoever, because his entire focus is on finally defeating his rival. Fans of anime characters like Vegeta celebrate both those darker qualities (making characters more relatable than pure-hearted heroes) and the rare moments in which these antiheroes show goodness. For some characters, it may be the general state of uncaring ruthlessness that makes moments of emotion and compassion so compelling.

Any account of the Dark Triad in media would be incomplete without acknowledging its role in pop music lyrics. For example, the proportion of pop music lyrics that reference or glorify the self (vs. more communal themes) has increased significantly over time (De-Wall, Pond, Jr., Campbell, & Twenge, 2011). This increase may be a reflection of a more general increase in narcissism over time (Twenge & Foster, 2010; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008; but also see Donnellan, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2009; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robbins, 2008, for alternate accounts). Are lyrical instances of psychopathy and Machiavellianism similarly increasing over time and do they glorify the fast life? This is a potentially fruitful avenue for future research. For instance, rap music

seems to advocate violence, risky sex, drug use (rapper Lil Wayne is a noted pot smoker), and criminality (rapper 50 Cent was a drug-dealer before rising to fame). All of these are part of the fast life strategy that rappers may have adopted, because some grew up in harsh socioeconomic conditions.

### Truth is Stranger Than Fiction

It would be rather benign if these traits were only found in movie and TV characters; however, this is not the case. Those with the Dark Triad traits may impose serious costs on society, which is why they have been traditionally treated as maladaptive and undesirable. Donald Trump fits the mold of a classic Dark Triad mass-media antihero from politics and business. Over the years, Trump successfully used a combination of hard work and Machiavellian charm to expand his father's real estate empire and become a real estate magnate. In addition, Trump's narcissism is constantly on display. He courted a great deal of media attention when he flirted with running for the 2000 and 2012 U.S. presidential elections. His callousness—a key facet of subclinical psychopathy—is constantly on display in his reality TV show, *The Apprentice*, where he plays himself—a boorish boss who appears to take pleasure in telling his employees, “You're fired!” Despite these negative traits, the media and the public appear to be fascinated with Trump's (mis)fortunes. To many, he is a folk hero of fame, capitalism, and the American Dream.

Looking internationally, the recently ousted Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi may be an exemplary Dark Triad politician. First, as with any “good” politician, he showed signs of textbook Machiavellianism. Being one of the richest men in the world (with a net worth exceeding US\$7 billion), Berlusconi has a nearly monopolistic control of the Italian media (e.g., TV, newspapers), which makes it easy for him to manipulate public opinion. His narcissism is clear in his professional life and statements he has made. For years, he was pressured to relinquish his party's leadership position, despite having been Prime Minister three times and serving in that position longer than anyone since Benito Mussolini. Berlusconi has shown some mild psychopathy in his disregard for the law, having faced multiple charges of fraud, collusion, and corruption. It took international pressure surrounding the economic troubles in Europe in the summer and fall of 2011 for him to reluctantly step-down, leaving behind a wake of destruction and scandal.

### Future Research and Conclusions

Although the Dark Triad traits are increasingly popular, the research suffers from some limitations. First, samples tend to be drawn exclusively from countries with some Western European or American ties, which makes some findings difficult to generalize. Second, because most Dark Triad research relies exclusively on self-report measures, it suffers from the same shortcoming that limit all self-report findings (e.g., socially desirable responding). Third, little is known about the processes or mechanisms that link the Dark Triad traits to behavior. While these are issues researchers will have to address, there are a number of limitations that are relevant to our discussion about the Dark Triad in popular culture.

We must be careful to draw strong conclusions from anecdotal evidence. A convenient criticism of the case we have made is that we have “cherry-picked” examples to substantiate our claims. To

this point, we respond that the focus of our article was merely to understand the way evolutionary psychology can be seen in popular culture. In so doing, we felt that picking examples familiar to most readers would facilitate both enjoyment and clarity. Nevertheless, systematic studies in popular culture could be undertaken. For instance, the popularity or even the rise of these characters in the media may be predicted by harsh economic conditions. Because individuals may be unable to act out a fast life strategy, characters like Batman may provide some kind of catharsis.

It is possible the Dark Triad of traits is incomplete. There may be other aspects of this latent disposition that still need to be added. Perhaps other facets of the erratic cluster of the *DSM-IV*, such as histrionic personality, might warrant inclusion. The possibility also exists that fast life strategies in women are simply manifested through different indicators than for men.

Despite this, it would be worth actually investigating just how appealing antiheroes are and why they are appealing. For instance, tracking consumer behavior, such as DVD sales and TV viewing, may give an estimate of the degree of viewing. We would predict that men will be drawn to these shows as exemplars of how to live, whereas women will be drawn to these shows because of the sexual appeal these “bad boys” have. We would suggest that although media studies might seem tangential to studying the Dark Triad traits, if you buy our case, it would provide an alternative and unique way to assess the presence, appeal, and even nature of these traits.

In conclusion, we have laid out a strong theoretical framework for studying the Dark Triad traits. Traditional personality psychology approached these traits as inherently bad for the individual and the group (Kowalski, 2001); however, an evolutionary approach provides a more tempered view (Buss, 2009). We have also highlighted some examples of antiheroes in the mass media and how their characteristics often reflect the Dark Triad traits. The Dark Triad traits may be part of an evolved suite of traits that facilitate the opportunistic and strategic exploitation of one's environment to increase reproductive fitness generated by ecologically harsh and unstable conditions that have been a ubiquitous presence in human history, as seen in the media.

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