FACT SHEET: THE DARK TRIAD

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What is the Dark Triad?

The Dark Triad is a set of three personality constructs: Machiavellianism, subclinical narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy, which have been deemed to be socially aversive. That is, individuals who possess characteristics of any of the personality disorders that make up the Dark Triad are likely to be selfish, possess a grandiose sense of importance, and feel an increased sense of entitlement. Further, these individuals are often pre-occupied with dominance and power and will use aggressive tactics such as manipulation and exploitation to get whatever it is that they feel that they deserve. Because of this, individuals with dark triad characteristics are possibly over-represented in offender samples (e.g., prisons). The current fact sheet discusses each of these three personality constructs in more detail.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is best represented as a manipulative personality, one who believes that the ends justify the means regardless of the human suffering. These individuals are arrogant, calculating and will use whatever means necessary, such as deception and undermining the trust of others, to achieve their goals. While society has deemed individuals with Machiavellianism to be aversive, Machiavellian’s do not see themselves as selfish or entitled and are excellent at rationalizing their behavior.

Machiavellianism is measured using the MACH-IV, a 20 item questionnaire that uses a 5-point likert scale. The MACH-IV assesses traits such as self-interest and the use of deception by including items such as: “it is wise to flatter important people” and “anyone who completely trusts someone else is asking for trouble”. Individuals are considered to be high in Machiavellian characteristics if they score over 60 on the MACH-IV.

Narcissism

Narcissism is a personality disorder characterized by feelings of dominance, grandiosity, and superiority. Individuals with narcissism often experience an increased sense of entitlement, a need to succeed, and a craving to be admired. This need to be admired often leads narcissists to high profile and stressful jobs, and because image is so important to narcissists they perform exceptionally well in difficult situations. While narcissists perform well in the workplace, they are not team players and are only interested in their own accomplishments. Individuals with this disorder will use whatever means necessary to get what they desire, including the use of deception and manipulation of others.

Narcissism is most often measured using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). The NPI is a 40-item forced choice questionnaire that requires the individual in question to choose between two opposing statements such as “I like to have authority over other people” or “I don’t mind following orders” and “I am an extraordinary person” or “I am much like everybody else”. The NPI has been shown to accurately assess characteristics of narcissism such as grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and superiority.

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Psychopathy

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by a cold and emotionally void personality as well as antisocial behavior. Personality traits common to psychopaths are high impulsivity, thrill seeking, glibness, low empathy, and recklessness. Psychopaths are superficially charming, are skilled liars, and they often use these skills to manipulate and exploit others. Further, they do not feel remorse or guilt after deceiving or manipulating others.

For more information on Psychopathy, see our Psychopathy Factsheet.

Similarities and differences

The personalities that make up the Dark Triad have many overlapping characteristics such as; a sense of entitlement, selfishness, and a grandiose sense of self-importance. Machiavellians, narcissists, and psychopaths are all likely to manipulate and exploit others to get whatever it is that they desire. Despite the similarities between these three personalities, research has shown that they are all distinctly different constructs. As an example, Machiavellian’s are different from narcissists in that they do not make inflated claims about their importance and do not strive to impress others. A second example is that Machiavellian’s and narcissists differ from psychopaths in that these individuals can understand the emotions of others and can express empathy for their victims.

Conclusion

Individuals who possess characteristics of the Dark Triad do not make for good friends. Not only are they not concerned with others, they are constantly focused on their own wants and needs and will do whatever they feel is necessary to achieve their goals, regardless of the consequences to others. This blatant disregard for others may lead individuals with these aversive personalities to behave anti-socially and to commit crimes. While there has been much research done to support the link between psychopathy and criminal behavior, there is currently no research supporting a direct link between individuals with Machiavellian and narcissistic personalities and criminal behavior. It is known that individuals with these personality characteristics are often found in offender populations, but further research must be done to learn more about the dark triad and criminal offending.
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Where can I get more information?

Information from the EAFL-S is available online, in PDF, or as paper brochures sent through the mail. If you would like to have EAFL-S publications, you can order hardcopies for a nominal fee through eaplstudent@gmail.com.

References


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