

The Relationship between the Dark Triad Traits and Subjective and Psychological Well-being among Iranian Students

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Submitted: 13 September 2019

Accepted: 20 October 2019

Int J Behav Sci. 2019; 13(3): 92-96

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Abstract

Introduction: Narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, collectively referred to as the Dark Triad, are sub-clinical personality traits that have been linked to a number of negative outcomes such as antisocial behaviors. This research examined how these Dark Triad personality traits differ in their relationships with well-being.

Method: The Persian versions of the 27-item Short Dark Triad, the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale, the 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale, and the 42-item version of Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-being were administered to a sample of 228 Iranian university students. Using SPSS, Pearson correlation coefficient, and regression analyses were applied to analyze the data.

Results: According to the results of this study, narcissism was positively related to both psychological and subjective well-being. On the other hand, psychopathy and Machiavellianism were related to lower levels of well-being. Narcissism was the strongest predictor of personal growth, self-acceptance, and happiness. Psychopathy was the strongest predictor of environmental mastery, positive relations with others, and purpose in life. Finally, Machiavellianism was the only predictor of autonomy.

Conclusion: This research, depicting the independent contributions of the Dark Triad personality traits to well-being, suggested that having a sub-clinical narcissistic personality is good for living a fully functioning life.

Keywords: Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Personality, Psychopathy, Well-being

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an exponential increase of interest in the Dark Triad traits (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). Although narcissism and psychopathy are originated in clinical literature, they are treated as sub-clinical traits in the Dark Triad composite. Therefore, the Dark Triad deals with these personality traits at non-clinical levels that varies within the normal population. People high on these sub-clinical personalities are characterized by callousness, dishonesty, duplicity, disagreeableness, and aggressiveness; they tend to lead a fast and exploitive, rather than a caring and prosocial, life [1-7].

Among these three dark traits, narcissism is on the "lighter" side while the other two are further on the dark side [1, 2]. For example, while individuals reporting higher levels of psychopathy and Machiavellianism do not particularly live a happy life, people showing narcissism frequently report higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem [8-13]. In addition, higher levels of attractiveness in narcissists result in positive feedback from others, which in turn improves self-views [14]. Nevertheless, even narcissism may have long-term interpersonal costs [15].

The current study has delineated a more comprehensive view of the Dark Triad personality traits' independent links to eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. Whereas some emerging studies report the relationship of the Dark Triad with Subjective Well-Being (SWB) [8-13], those studies examining eudemonic well-being in relation to the dark traits are very

few [13]. Most, if not all, of these studies have been carried out in a Western culture and thus, due to cultural differences, their findings may not be generalizable to Iranian context. Although the Dark Triad are theoretically linked traits, they tend to be studied in isolation. This issue has led to an understanding about how these traits converge and diverge in their associations with well-being outcomes.

Hedonic conceptualization of well-being, upon which the SWB measurements are based, involves the pursuit of immediate gratification, whereas eudaimonic well-being may need an investment in the future, and involve activities that are not necessarily enjoyable at the time they are carried out [16]. Since much of the common variance in the Dark Triad is captured by the Honesty–Humility personality factor [17, 18] and because Honesty–Humility has positive correlations with Ryff's [19, 20] psychological well-being measures which are based on a eudemonic conceptualization of well-being, some negative associations between the Dark Triad (particularly psychopathy and Machiavellianism) and eudemonic well-being is expected.

Due to narcissism's links to SWB [6-13], and the overlap between hedonic and eudemonic well-being [16] a similar pattern of results is expected to be observed in the eudemonic arena. In fact, a previous study among Polish students has found narcissism to be related to both aspects of well-being [10]. Thus, three hypotheses have been considered in the present study. Hypothesis 1 stated that psychopathy would negatively associate with both aspects of well-being. Hypothesis 2 stated that Machiavellianism would also negatively associate with well-being outcomes, and hypothesis 3 stated that higher scorers on narcissism would report higher scores on both subjective and psychological well-being.

Method

Two hundred and twenty-eight university student who were volunteers from Allameh Tabataba'i University were selected through a non-random sampling. Given the number of variables being measured, the total number of participants seems adequate. The participants (68.9% female) had ages ranging from 18 to 49, with a mean of 21.87 (SD = 4.6). They completed the Persian versions of these measures. Participants rated all items described in this section on a five-point Likert scale (1 = mostly uncharacteristic, 5 = mostly characteristic), unless indicated otherwise.

The tools used in this research are as follows:

Short Dark Triad

The 27-item Short Dark Triad (9 items per trait) was applied to measure narcissism ("People see me as a natural leader"), psychopathy ("Payback needs to be quick and nasty"), and Machiavellianism ("I like to use clever manipulation to get my way"). This scale has shown convergent validity and reliability with alphas ranging from .71 to .80 [13, 21]. In preparation for this study, this scale was translated into Persian, according to standard procedures of forward and back-translation. Alpha

reliability for the Persian version of this scale, in the current study, was at .66.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) [22] was applied to measure the cognitive aspect of SWB. This brief scale is a highly reliable and well-validated measure of positive emotions [23]. A sample item is: "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life". Cronbach's alpha for the SWLS was at .87 and its two month test-retest reliability was at .82 [22]. Cronbach's alpha for the Persian version of the SWLS in a previous study was at .80 [24]. Cronbach's alpha for this scale, in the current study, was at .80.

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)

The 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) was applied to measure the affective aspect of SWB. This scale had shown test-retest reliability, discriminant and convergent validity, and internal consistency. Sample item is "Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself: 1 = less happy to 7 = more happy". Cronbach's alphas ranged from .79 to .94. A one-month test-retest reliability of the SHS was at .90 [25]. Cronbach's alpha for the Persian version of the SHS in a previous study was at .79 [26]. Cronbach's alpha for the SHS in the current study was at .79.

Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-being

The 42-item version of Ryff's [19] Scales of Psychological Well-being was used to measure the psychological well-being factors. This is the most commonly applied index of eudaimonic well-being, and include autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. A sample item is: "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life". Ryff's [19] measure has factorial validity, high internal consistency and high criterion-related validity. Cronbach's alpha for the Persian version of this measure, in a previous study, was at .89 [24]. Also, Cronbach's alpha for the short (18-item) version of this measure was at .89 [27]. Cronbach's alphas for the Persian versions of these scales, in the current study, ranged from .57 to .81.

Paper-and-pencil survey packages containing the Persian versions of the abovementioned measures were administered to groups of various sizes in classrooms. After giving informed consent, participants completed demographic questions, followed by the measures described in the previous section. All procedures were conformed to institutional ethical guidelines for research on human subjects.

Results

Table 1 shows bivariate correlations of the Dark Triad personality traits with well-being variables. As expected, narcissism was related to higher levels of SWB as well as psychological well-being. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated with lower levels of both variants of well-being.

Table 1. Correlations between the Dark Triad traits and well-being variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Narcissism	1									
2. Psychopathy	0.12*	1								
3. Machiavellianism	0.04	0.20**	1							
4. Life Satisfaction	0.21**	-0.22**	-0.09	1						
5. Happiness	0.27**	-0.01	-0.08	0.28**	1					
6. Autonomy	0.11*	-0.02	-0.13*	0.10	0.15*	1				
7. Environmental Mastery	0.16**	-0.28**	-0.09	0.40**	0.40**	0.28**	1			
8. Personal Growth	0.19**	-0.13*	-0.13*	0.40**	0.28**	0.31**	0.46**	1		
9. Positive relations with others	0.14*	-0.27**	-0.23**	0.20**	0.45**	0.15*	0.47**	0.38**	1	
10. Purpose in Life	-0.01	-0.22**	-0.08	0.25**	0.12*	0.30**	0.36**	0.43**	0.24**	1
11. Self-acceptance	0.22**	-0.17**	-0.20**	0.56**	0.48**	0.30**	0.57**	0.53**	0.42**	0.46**

Note: * p < 0.05; ** p < .001.

A series of regression (using Enter method) were applied to assess the discriminant validity of the Dark Triad traits (Table 2-9). For all multiple regression analyses performed, collinearity was tested based on Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for individual variables. The VIF values larger than 6 indicate excessive collinearity. Table 2 shows that narcissism and psychopathy predict life satisfaction; these two have the same weight but in opposite directions. The VIF values for the Dark Triad, in this regression, ranged from 1.01 (Narcissism) to 1.06 (psychopathy) which means that collinearity was not an issue for this analysis.

Table 2. Regression predicting life satisfaction from the Dark Triad

	B	SE	Beta	t	P
Narcissism	0.36	0.09	0.24	3.83	0.01
Psychopathy	-0.36	0.09	-0.24	-3.78	0.01
Machiavellianism	-0.08	0.10	-0.05	-0.84	0.39
R ²		0.11			0.01

Table 3 shows that narcissism was the sole predictor of happiness. All VIF values in this and the remaining regression models (Table 3-9) were less than 2, suggesting that collinearity was not a problem.

Table 3. Regression predicting happiness from the Dark Triad

	B	SE	Beta	t	P
Narcissism	0.56	0.12	0.28	4.33	0.01
Psychopathy	-0.04	0.13	-0.02	-0.32	0.74
Machiavellianism	-0.19	0.14	-0.08	-1.36	0.17
R ²		0.08			0.01

Table 4 shows that both narcissism (although marginally) and Machiavellianism predict autonomy.

Table 4. Regression predicting autonomy from the Dark Triad.

	B	SE	Beta	t	P
Narcissism	0.13	0.07	0.12	1.84	0.06
Psychopathy	-0.01	0.07	-0.01	-0.14	0.88
Machiavellianism	-0.16	0.07	-0.14	-2.08	0.03
R ²		0.03			0.05

Table 5 shows that both narcissism and psychopathy predict environmental mastery. Psychopathy was the strongest predictor.

Table 6 shows that the Dark Triad predict personal growth. Narcissism was the strongest predictor.

Table 5. Regression predicting environmental mastery from the Dark Triad

	B	SE	Beta	t	P
Narcissism	0.23	0.07	0.20	3.28	0.01
Psychopathy	-0.34	0.07	-0.30	-4.71	0.01
Machiavellianism	-0.04	0.07	-0.04	-0.62	0.53
R ²		0.12			0.01

Table 6. Regression predicting personal growth from the Dark Triad

	B	SE	Beta	t	P
Narcissism	0.23	0.07	0.21	3.31	0.01
Psychopathy	-0.14	0.07	-0.13	-1.99	0.04
Machiavellianism	-0.14	0.07	-0.12	-1.83	0.06
R ²		0.07			0.01

Table 7 shows that the Dark Triad predict positive relations with others. Psychopathy was the strongest predictor.

Table 7. Regression predicting positive relations with others from the Dark Triad

	B	SE	Beta	t	P
Narcissism	0.23	0.08	0.18	2.93	0.01
Psychopathy	-0.33	0.08	-0.25	-4.02	0.01
Machiavellianism	-0.25	0.08	-0.18	-2.92	0.01
R ²		0.13			0.01

Table 8 shows that psychopathy was the only predictor of purpose in life.

Table 8. Regression predicting purpose in life from the Dark Triad

	B	SE	Beta	t	P
Narcissism	0.01	0.07	0.01	0.19	0.84
Psychopathy	-0.23	0.07	-0.21	-3.17	0.01
Machiavellianism	-0.05	0.07	-0.04	-0.65	0.51
R ²		0.05			0.01

Table 9 shows that the Dark Triad predict self-acceptance. Narcissism was the strongest predictor.

Table 9. Regression predicting self-acceptance from the Dark Triad

	B	SE	Beta	t	P
Narcissism	0.34	0.08	0.25	4.07	0.01
Psychopathy	-0.22	0.08	-0.16	-2.60	0.01
Machiavellianism	-0.26	0.08	-0.18	-2.87	0.01
R ²		0.12			0.01

Discussion

A large portion of studies in psychology has been devoted to the investigation of the determinants, correlates, and consequences of well-being. Well-being has been considered as the positive side of mental health, and it has long been known that personality is a strong predictor of well-being. Much of the research in this area has focused on the relationship of well-being with normal personality traits [20]. This study aimed to investigate the relations of the Dark Triad of personality to SWB and psychological well-being.

The Dark Triad personality traits' links to well-being is a neglected area of study. Past research demonstrated the negative outcomes of the Dark Triad traits. The current investigation helped to extend the literature on adaptive and maladaptive correlates of the Dark Triad personality traits. In accordance with previous research [13], positive links were observed between SWB and narcissism, and also negative associations were found between SWB and the other two dark traits. Narcissism was also correlated to psychological well-being suggesting that people high on sub-clinical narcissism may be living the full life. They are actually high in both eudaimonia and hedonia [28]. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism negatively associated with almost all well-being measures. These findings implies that when people with dark personalities are not found to be happier than average, it is not because of their narcissism but it is because of their Machiavellian and most probably their psychopathic nature. The Dark Triad traits in the current investigation significantly predicted well-being variables and was found to be useful and applicable for the prediction of individual differences in the realm of positive psychology.

Darkness of any personality trait may be judged by its costs for the self and for the others [2]. The current study reveals that narcissism is the lighter and psychopathy is the darker side of these dark personality traits. Sub-clinical narcissists in the current sample reported to have "positive relations with others". In addition, as high scorers on the factor "positive relations with others" are concerned about the welfare of others, and are capable of empathy and intimacy [19], one might suggest that narcissism has positive outcomes for well-being of others too. However, further research is needed to test this speculation.

In the current study, narcissism was positively and Machiavellianism was negatively related to "autonomy". This suggests that higher scorers on narcissism may be self-determining and independent, able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways, regulate behavior from within, and evaluate themselves by personal standards. Whereas higher scorers on Machiavellianism may be concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others, rely on judgments of others to make important decisions, or at times conform to social pressures to think and act in certain ways [19].

While "environmental mastery" was related to higher levels of narcissism, it was related to lower levels of psychopathy. These findings suggest that higher scorers

on narcissism may have a sense of mastery and competence in managing their environment, control complex array of external activities, make effective use of their surrounding opportunities, or able to choose or create contexts suitable to their needs and values. While, people with higher levels of psychopathy may have difficulty managing everyday affairs, at times feel unable to change or improve their surrounding context, be unaware of surrounding opportunities, or sometimes lack sense of control over the external world [19].

Another finding of this study was the positive relation of narcissism and negative relations of psychopathy and Machiavellianism with "personal growth". These findings suggest that people with higher levels of narcissism may have a feeling of continued development. They may see themselves as growing and expanding and may be open to new experiences. They may also have a sense of realizing their potential and see improvement in themselves and their own behavior over time. On the other hand, people with higher levels of psychopathy/Machiavellianism may have a sense of personal stagnation, lack sense of improvement or expansion over time, feel bored and uninterested with life, or at times feel unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors [19].

Among the Dark Triad in the current study, only psychopathy was related to "purpose in life". This negative association means that people with higher levels of psychopathy may lack a sense of meaning in life, have few goals, lack sense of direction, do not see purpose of past life, or have no beliefs that give life a meaning. The positive relation of narcissism with "self-acceptance" in this study shows that high scorers on narcissism possess a positive attitude toward the self. They may acknowledge and accept multiple aspects of themselves and feel positive about their past. Negative relations of psychopathy and Machiavellianism with self-acceptance suggest that people with higher levels of psychopathy/Machiavellianism may feel dissatisfied with themselves; they may be disappointed with what has occurred in their past and be troubled about certain personal characteristics. In addition, they may wish to be different from what they are today [19].

This study was a correlational research. Thus, no conclusions could be drawn about causality. Other limitations include the use of self-report measures and the use of a convenience sample of university students. Further research, using alternative methods and samples, is needed to highlight the divergent well-being outcomes of these dark traits. It would be useful in future to obtain observer reports too, and to see how dark personalities actually relate to eudaimonic and hedonic well-being of others.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the Dark Triad personalities (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) vary along a continuum of well-being and adjustment, with narcissism showing more positive associations with mental health and well-being than the others.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank her wife for her emotional and intellectual support.

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