Well-being and the Dark Triad

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ABSTRACT

Much of the research in the last few years has linked the Dark Triad traits (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) to negative outcomes. In a sample of Polish undergraduate students, we examined how the Dark Triad traits differ in their relationships with eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. Narcissism was positively related to both variants of well-being, and after controlling for its shared variance with the other two dark traits its relations to well-being outcomes have noticeably increased. While psychopathy was related to lower levels of both eudaimonic and hedonic well-being, Machiavellianism was generally unrelated to well-being outcomes. The Dark Triad managed to predict unique variance in most of well-being scales, beyond broad personality factors. This research, depicting independent contributions of the Dark Triad traits to eudaimonic and hedonic well-being, suggested that having a sub-clinical narcissistic personality is helpful for living a good, full functioning life, and may even be useful for well-being of others.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been exponential increase of interest in a set of socially aversive traits collectively referred to as the Dark Triad traits (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) and their psychosocial determinants and correlates. Although narcissism and psychopathy are originated in clinical literature and practice, they are treated as sub-clinical traits in the Dark Triad composite. Hence, the Dark Triad deals with narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism at non-clinical levels that varies within the normal population. People high on these "dark" personalities are characterized by disagreeableness, callousness, dishonesty, duplicity, and aggressiveness; they tend to lead a fast and exploitive, rather than a caring and prosocial, life (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Pabian, De Backer, & Vandebosch, 2015; Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Of these three dark traits narcissism is on the "lighter" side while the other two, the Malicious Two, are further on the dark side (Furnham et al., 2013; Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). For instance, while people showing psychopathic or Machiavellian traits do not particularly live a long, and happy life, high scorers on narcissism often report higher levels of self-esteem and subjective well-being (SWB; Egan, Chan, & Shorter, 2014; Jonason, Baughman, Carter, & Parker, 2015; Ng, Cheung, & Tam, 2014; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004; Zajenkowski & Czarna, 2014). Additionally, higher levels of attractiveness (a desirable feature in both short-term and long-term relationships) in narcissists "lead to positive feedback from others that

enhances self-views" (Holtzman & Strube, 2010, p. 134). Nevertheless, this does not mean that narcissism is a purely adaptive trait; it is clearly maladaptive in a number of respects, and has long-term interpersonal costs, such as mate abandonment, and attachment dysfunctions (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010; Jonason et al., 2015; Rose, 2002).

In the current study we are interested in delineating a more comprehensive view of the Dark Triad traits' independent links to eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. While some emerging studies report the relationship of the Dark Triad with SWB (Aghababaei, Mohammadtabar, & Saffarinia, 2014; Egan et al., 2014; Jonason et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2014; Rose, 2002; Sedikides et al., 2004; Zajenkowski & Czarna, 2014), those examining eudaimonic well-being in relation to the dark traits are almost non-existent. Hedonic conceptualization of well-being, upon which the SWB measurements are based, involves the pursuit of fairly 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 (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Since much of the common variance in the Dark Triad is captured by the HEXACO Honesty–Humility dimension (Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015; Lee et al., 2013) and that Honesty–Humility has been shown to have positive correlations with Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being measures, which are based on a eudaimonic conceptualization of well-being (Aghababaei & Arji, 2014; Romero, Villar, & López-Romero, 2015) we expect to find some negative associations between the Dark Triad particularly the Malicious Two and eudaimonic well-being. Due to narcissism's links to greater self-esteem and SWB, and the overlap between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Huta & Ryan, 2010) one might expect to find a similar pattern of results in the eudaimonic arena.

To be of ultimate value for personality psychology, the Dark Triad traits need to show that they represent something new about people.

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The HEXACO model of personality is a good base of prediction against which the contribution of the Dark Triad can be compared, because the HEXACO model showed an advantage over the Big Five model in predicting psychological well-being (Aghababaei & Arji, 2014). Additionally, it has been suggested that HEXACO Honesty–Humility represents the core of the Dark Triad (Book et al., 2015). Therefore, we will see whether the links between dark personalities and well-being variables remain significant even after controlling for Honesty–Humility and the other HEXACO factors.

Thus, in this paper we compare the Dark Triad traits in their relationships with individual differences in eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. As a secondary aim, we would also see whether the Dark Triad traits manage to predict well-being variables beyond the "normal" personality factors.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of two hundred and twenty Polish undergraduate students, of whom 91.8% were female, recruited from a state university in Poland. Participants had ages ranging from 18 to 24, with a mean of 19.69 (SD = .92). They completed a paper-and-pencil survey package containing the Polish versions of these measures which have been used previously in Poland and proven to be reliable and valid (e.g. Aghababaei & Błachnio, 2014; Szarota, Ashton, & Lee, 2007). Questionnaire booklets were administered to groups of various sizes in classrooms. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all procedures conformed to institutional ethical guidelines for research. Participants rated all items described in this section on a five-point Likert scale (1 = mostly uncharacteristic, 5 = mostly characteristic), unless indicated otherwise.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Short Dark Triad

The 27-item Short Dark Triad (SD3) was applied to measure narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (9 items per trait). This is a non-clinical measure of the Dark Triad, permitting the evaluation of empirical associations in normal populations. In other words, the SD3 measures the Dark Triad as three dimensional phenomena which are present in varying degrees in the normal population. The SD3 has shown convergent validity and reliability with alphas ranging from .71 to .80 (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

2.2.2. Subjective Happiness Scale

The 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) is a global assessment of happiness. The SHS 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" (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

2.2.3. Satisfaction with Life Scale

The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was applied to measure the cognitive aspect of SWB. This brief scale is a highly reliable and well-validated measure of positive emotions.

2.2.4. Scales of Psychological Well-being

The 42-item version of Ryff's (1989) Scales of Psychological Well-being, which is the most frequently used measure of eudaimonic well-being, was used to measure the theory-driven six-factor psychological well-being (7 items per scale): autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Ryff's (1989) measure has factorial validity, high internal consistency and high criterion-related validity.

2.2.5. HEXACO Personality Inventory

The 60-item HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised was applied to measure the broad personality traits of Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to experience (10 items per factor). This inventory has convergent validity and internal consistency reliability (Ashton & Lee, 2009).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) for all scales used in this study are detailed in Table 1. Bivariate correlations of the Dark Triad with well-being variables and the HEXACO factors are shown in Table 2. As predicted, narcissism was related to greater happiness and life satisfaction, as well as psychological well-being. Psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated with lower levels of both variants of well-being, with psychopathy showing stronger correlations. Psychopathy had a strong correlation with Machiavellianism, even after controlling for narcissism. Narcissism, on the other hand, had a weak correlation with Machiavellianism, and after controlling for psychopathy this relation became non-significant. The Malicious Two, as expected, negatively were related to Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness factors, whereas narcissism was only related to lower Honesty–Humility with the Humility sub-factor driving this relationship.

Table 2 also shows partial correlations of each dark trait with well-being and the HEXACO scales, controlled for the other two dark traits with which they presumably share a common core. Narcissism has become more strongly related to well-being variables. While there have been some minor changes in the relations of psychopathy, most of Machiavellianism's relations to well-being became non-significant.

We ran a series of hierarchical regressions to determine the unique contribution of the Dark Triad by controlling for the HEXACO factors. In doing so, the Dark Triad traits were entered in step 2, after entering HEXACO in step 1. After controlling for HEXACO dimensions, the Dark Triad managed to explain additional unique variance in all of well-being scales, except autonomy and environmental mastery (see Table 3).

4. Discussion

Past research examined and revealed the negative consequences of the Dark Triad. The current investigation helped to extend the literature on adaptive and non-adaptive consequences of the Dark Triad. As with previous research, we found positive links between SWB and narcissism, and negative associations between SWB and the other two dark traits. Narcissism was also correlated with psychological well-being

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for all measures.

	Alpha	Mean	Median	SD	Range	Min (Max)
Narcissism	.67	2.93	2.88	.55	3.22	1 (5)
Psychopathy	.69	2.11	2.11	.57	2.67	1 (5)
Machiavellianism	.65	3.06	3.11	.52	2.67	1 (5)
Life satisfaction	.77	3.49	3.60	.68	3.40	1 (5)
Happiness	.82	4.62	4.50	1.10	5.50	1 (7)
Autonomy	.79	3.54	3.57	.68	3.43	1 (5)
Environmental mastery	.81	3.32	3.42	.69	3.86	1 (5)
Personal growth	.75	3.92	3.92	.60	2.71	1 (5)
Positive relations with others	.82	3.93	4.07	.73	3.14	1 (5)
Purpose in life	.67	3.68	3.71	.60	3.00	1 (5)
Self-acceptance	.81	3.32	3.42	.72	3.83	1 (5)
Honesty–Humility	.77	3.45	3.50	.63	3.10	1 (5)
Emotionality	.74	3.43	3.50	.60	3.30	1 (5)
Extraversion	.70	3.27	3.30	.56	3.40	1 (5)
Agreeableness	.73	3.09	3.10	.59	3.10	1 (5)
Conscientiousness	.83	3.31	3.30	.67	3.50	1 (5)
Openness to experience	.69	3.36	3.40	.62	3.00	1 (5)

Table 2
Zero-order (and partial) correlations between the Dark Triad, and other variables.

	Narcissism	Psychopathy	Machiavellianism	Dark Triad composite
Narcissism	1			.64**
Psychopathy	.29** (.16*)	1		.79**
Machiavellianism	.16* (.06)	.48** (.46**)	1	.74**
Subjective well-being				
Life satisfaction	.43** (.48**)	−.13* (−.19**)	−.11 (.09)	.08
Happiness	.37** (.46**)	−.23** (−.25**)	−.21** (−.16*)	−.03
Psychological well-being				
Autonomy	.29** (.31**)	−.03 (−.07)	-.03 (−.04)	.10
Environmental mastery	.28** (.37**)	−.24** (−.23**)	−.24** (−.14**)	−.07
Personal growth	.31** (.41**)	−.32** (−.34**)	−.20** (−.08)	−.09
Positive relations with others	.17** (.32**)	−.44** (−.42**)	−.27** (−.10)	−.25**
Purpose in life	.26** (.36**)	−.32** (−.34**)	−.19** (−.07)	−.11
Self-acceptance	.34** (.42**)	−.25** (−.27**)	−.18** (−.11)	−.04
HEXACO scales				
Honesty–Humility	−.15* (−.03)	−.49** (−.33**)	−.49** (.33**)	−.52**
Emotionality	−.14* (−.08)	−.30** (−.24**)	−.16* (−.01)	−.28**
Extraversion	.51** (.56**)	−.12 (−.20**)	−.11 (−.11)	.12
Agreeableness	−.13 (−.02)	−.47** (−.38**)	−.31** (−.11)	−.42**
Conscientiousness	.07 (.14*)	−.27** (−.25**)	−.15* (−.04)	−.16*
Openness to experience	.12 (.16*)	−.09 (−.02)	−.18** (−.17*)	−.06
Honesty–Humility facets				
Sincerity	−.02 (.08)	−.38** (−.29**)	−.30** (−.15*)	−.33**
Fairness	−.03 (.08)	−.45** (−.32**)	−.41** (−.26**)	−.41**
Greed avoidance	−.15* (−.08)	−.25** (−.07)	−.36** (−.28**)	−.35**
Modesty	−.34** (−.29**)	−.30** (−.11)	−.35** (−.23**)	−.46**

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Values in parentheses are partial correlations of each dark trait controlled for the other two dark traits.

suggesting that people high on sub-clinical narcissism might live a "full life" (being high in both eudaimonia and hedonia; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). While psychopathy negatively associated with all well-being measures, the negative links between Machiavellianism and well-being were generally non-significant. Additionally, the Dark Triad composite had null or negative relations with well-being variables. As suggested by Furnham et al. (2013), we did not rely on only zero-order correlations as the sole method of analysis. Because of the shared core of the Dark Triad, partial correlations of the Dark Triad to well-being variables have been also reported to find out their independent contributions to well-being. Controlling for effects of the Malicious Two increased the positive associations between narcissism and well-being variables. This 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 rather because of their Machiavellian and most probably their psychopathic characteristics.

Darkness of any personality trait may be judged by its consequences for the self and for others (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). In this sense, current study by showing narcissism's benefits for well-being of the self confirms that narcissism is the "lighter" and psychopathy is the "darker" side of these dark personality traits. The findings of this study, however, do not imply that the inclusion of narcissism as one of the Dark Triad traits should be questioned. They merely suggest that the dark personalities vary along a continuum of well-being and adjustment, with narcissism showing more positive associations with mental health and well-being than the others. Nevertheless, this conclusion is based on results obtained from a non-clinical sample. Additional research is needed to apply this to clinical context.

Table 3
Regressions predicting well-being variables.

	Psychological well-being						Subjective well-being	
	A	EM	PG	PR	PL	SA	Happiness	Life Satisfaction
Step 1								
Honesty–Humility	.27**	.14**	.22**	.12*	.12*	07	.07	.04
Emotionality	−.20**	−.13**	.08	.25**	.04	−.07	−.07	−.01
Extraversion	.37**	.53**	.42**	.48**	.34**	.57**	.60**	.46**
Agreeableness	−.29**	.11*	−.05	.20**	.01	.09	.16**	.04
Conscientiousness	.10	.18**	.19**	.07	.33**	.04	.02	.15**
Openness to experience	.09	−.05	.20**	.02	.09	.06	.06	.13*
Unadjusted R^2	.33**	.48**	.38**	.41**	.34**	.41**	.49**	.31**
Adjusted R^2	.31**	.46**	.37**	.39**	.32**	.40**	.47**	.29**
Step 2								
Narcissism	.08	.06	.17*	.04	.15*	.12	.14*	.28**
Psychopathy	−.06	−.07	−.20**	−.23**	−.21**	−.21**	−.12	−.03
Machiavellianism	0.7	−.05	.04	−.02	.01	−.05	−.08	.01
Unadjusted R^2	.34**	.49**	.42**	.44**	.37**	.44**	.51**	.36**
Adjusted R^2	.31**	.46**	.39**	.41**	.34**	.42**	.49**	.34**
Adjusted R^2 Change	.00	.00	.02*	.02*	.02*	.02**	.02*	.05**

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; A, autonomy; EM, environmental mastery; PG, personal growth.
PR, positive relations with others; PL, purpose in life; SA, self-acceptance.

N. Aghababaei, A. Błachnio / Personality and Individual Differences 86 (2015) 365–368

Since high scorers on narcissism in the current sample reported to have "positive relations with others", and because of the fact that high scorers on "positive relations with others" are concerned about the welfare of others, are capable of empathy, affection, and intimacy, and understand give and take of human relationships (Ryff, 1989) one might propose that narcissism would have positive consequences for well-being of others too. Further research is needed to test this speculation, however.

So far a few candidates have been proposed to account for a common core that underlies the Dark Triad. Low Honesty–Humility is among the strongest candidates (Book et al., 2015; Furnham et al., 2013). That the Dark Triad composite in the current study was strongly correlated to both Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness dimensions, however, seemed to supply evidence against the suggestion that the negative pole of Honesty–Humility alone is the core of "evil". Instead, other personalities and characteristics such as disagreeableness may also be involved, as would be suggested by previous research (see Furnham et al., 2013). Altruism is a related construct that may be linked to the core of the Dark Triad. Reciprocal altruism has been represented by the HEXACO Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness factors, while kin altruism has been linked to HEXACO Emotionality. The overall tendency to be altruistic, then, represents a blend of these three dimensions (Ashton & Lee, 2009) which in the current study were the strongest correlates of the Dark Triad composite.

The Dark Triad in the current investigation added only trivial additional explained variation when attempting to predict well-being variables beyond the normal personality factors. These results indicate that the usefulness and applicability of the dark personalities to the prediction of individual differences in positive psychology may be marginal, at least given the observations within the current sample. The use of self-report measures and the use of a convenience sample of mostly female university students were the limitations of this research. It would be useful in future to obtain observer reports too, and to see how dark personalities relate to eudaimonic and hedonic well-being of others.

Acknowledgments

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