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Dark Triad and Religiosity

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Synonyms

Psychopathy; Machiavellianism and narcissism; Religiosity

Definition

The Dark Triad consists of the traits psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism. We review the relation between the Dark Triad and religiosity, be it intrinsic, extrinsic, or general. Psychopathy is negatively associated with intrinsic religiosity and general religiosity. Very little research has addressed the link between psychopathy and extrinsic religiosity, producing mixed results. Further, Machiavellianism is negatively related to intrinsic religiosity, but positively related to extrinsic religiosity. The evidence on the link between Machiavellianism and general religiosity is limited and mixed. Finally, narcissism is negatively associated with intrinsic religiosity, but positively associated with extrinsic religiosity. The evidence on the association between narcissism and general religiosity is mixed. The relation between the Dark Triad and religiosity might be contingent on cultural context. For example, the relation between the Dark Triad and extrinsic religiosity might be higher in theist cultures, which adhere to strong religiosity norms, compared to secular cultures, which adhere loosely to religiosity norms.

The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad refers to a constellation of three personality traits that are conceptually distinct but empirically overlapping. These traits, which are normally distributed in the population, are psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Rogoza et al., 2021). Although the traits exhibit unique correlates, they share commonalities in terms of callousness and manipulativeness. For reasons of brevity, we will often refer to individuals high (vs. low) on psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism as "psychopaths," "Machiavellians," and "narcissists," respectively.

Psychopathy is characterized by high impulsivity and thrill-seeking, combined with low levels of empathy and anxiety (Hare, 1985; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). It is also characterized by exceptionally low agreeableness and conscientiousness (Miller et al., 2001), and is considered the most malevolent of the Dark

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Triad (Rauthmann, 2012). Machiavellianism, on the other hand, is marked by cynicism, lack of principles, and reliance on interpersonal manipulation as a strategy for getting ahead (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Machiavellians are prone to deceitful, unscrupulous behavior (Christie & Geis, 1970). Lastly, narcissism entails status pursuit, grandiosity, and entitlement (Sedikides, 2021; Thomaes et al., 2018). Narcissists assert dominance and seek admiration rather than affection (Leder et al., 2020), viewing communality (e.g., warmth, empathy, and caring) as indicative of lower status and, as such, contemptuous (Czarna et al., 2014; Zdunek et al., 2022).

In folk psychology, dark or troubled personalities are often attributed to nonbelievers due to prevalent anti-atheist prejudice (Alper et al., 2021; Martínez-Taboas et al., 2011), such as stereotypes of atheists as amoral, noncompassionate, and promiscuous (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Dubendorff & Luchner, 2017; Gervais et al., 2017). Yet, empirical research examining the association between the Dark Triad and religiosity remains limited. In the following sections, we discuss evidence addressing the question of whether Dark Triad individuals are religious.

On the Religiosity of Dark Triad Individuals

Belief in supernatural agents satisfies various psychological needs, such as those for existential security, meaning, control, certainty, self-esteem, and moral comfort or elevation (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2013). Personality differences in the strength of these needs contribute to variation in religiosity. High Dark Triad individuals might engage in religious practices not just to satisfy psychological needs, but mostly to opportunistically pursue self-serving goals (e.g., making profitable acquaintances, increasing one's chances of professional or material success, and enhancing one's status or prestige).

But are high Dark Triad individuals religious to begin with? In one study (Kaufman et al., 2019), the Dark Triad was unrelated to general religiosity, assessed with a single question. Other studies yielded more nuanced findings. Of relevance is the dimension of intrinsic versus extrinsic religiosity (Allport & Ross, 1967), commonly assessed with various versions of Allport and Ross's (1967) Religious Orientation Scale (ROS). Intrinsic religiosity is an end-in-itself, stemming from authentic religious belief rather than external pressures, and is strongly positively associated with indices of religious commitment such as practice and participation (Maltby et al., 1999; Paek, 2006). Extrinsic religiosity involves superficial adherence to religious belief, using it as a means for achieving self-serving goals, and is weakly or even negatively associated with indices of religious commitment (Maltby et al., 1999; Paek, 2006). The Dark Triad is related to lower intrinsic but higher extrinsic religiosity assessed with a version of ROS as in Aghababaei et al. (2014) and Łowicki and Zajenkowski (2017) but also with the Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Theistic Faith (Astley et al., 2012) as in Francis and Crea (2021) or with The New Indices of Religious Orientation Revised (Francis et al., 2016) as in Kaumbur et al. (2017). Below, we review relations of the Dark Triad with religiosity, and, in particular, intrinsic versus extrinsic religiosity.

Psychopathy

Intuitive thinking, characterized by automatic and heuristic processing, along with theory of mind (i.e., ability to understand and infer others' thoughts and intentions), form the basis for belief in supernatural agents, that is, conceptualizing deities as intentional agents with mental states; in contrast, analytic thinking, characterized by deliberate and reflective reasoning, is associated with religious disbelief (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012; Gervais, 2013). Psychopaths often manifest strengths in abstract reasoning and problem-solving, reflecting a cognitive style that prioritizes rationality over emotional input (Anderson & Kiehl, 2014). They also display deficits in empathy, affective theory of mind (i.e., ability to understand and infer other people's emotions), and emotional intelligence (i.e., ability to recognize, understand, manage, and influence emotions—

both in oneself and others), while showing an impairment in understanding others' emotional states as well as pervasive emotion recognition deficits (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Baskin-Sommers et al., 2009; Dawel et al., 2012; Michels & Schulze, 2021; Rijnders et al., 2021; Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2010). Such predominantly analytic thinking, along with deficits in empathy and theory of mind, predict weaker belief in God (Norenzayan et al., 2012).

Relatedly, religion may not be of high psychological importance to psychopaths. This assertion is based on two literature streams. First, although religious belief serves psychological needs, high psychopaths are unlikely to seek it for this reason. They might not experience insecurity, uncertainty, low self-esteem, guilt, shame, or moral discomfort in the same way or to the same extent as low psychopaths. High psychopaths demonstrate atypical autonomic and somatic responses to situations and stimuli that often provoke anxiety or fear in others (Mealey & Kinner, 2003). Moreover, they remain unaffected by the distress or suffering of others (Decety et al., 2013). This absence of emotional and empathic constraints enables them to engage in self-centered and selfish behaviors, unrestrained by considerations of reciprocity, guilt, or shame, and likely without seeking forgiveness, spiritual solace, or validation from religious entities. Second, religious practice, and in particular church attendance frequency, is negatively associated with antisocial or criminal behavior (Ellis, 1985; Laird et al., 2011). Given the positive relation between general religiosity and impulse control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), one would anticipate a negative association between indices of religiosity and psychopathy (Lilienfeld et al., 2014).

Consistent with the above literature streams, psychopathy is negatively linked to intrinsic religiosity (Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017), as assessed with the ROS. It is also negatively linked to general religiosity, assessed with a single question about religious affiliation (Haddad et al., 2016; Lilienfeld et al., 2014), Willard and Norenzayan (2013) questionnaire (Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017), or Schofield et al.'s (2018) Supernatural Belief Scale (Schofield et al., 2022). Psychopathy's link to extrinsic religiosity is unclear, as the scare empirical findings are inconsistent. Some of them point to a positive link (Kaumbur et al., 2017), some to a negative link (Aghababaei et al., 2014), and still some to no link (Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017). Moreover, psychopathy is negatively associated with five out of six dimensions of religious and spiritual well-being, assessed with the Multidimensional Inventory of Religious/Spiritual Well-Being (Unterrainer et al., 2010), even after controlling for the shared variance of other Dark Triad traits (Kämmerle et al., 2014). These five dimensions are general religiosity, hope immanent (i.e., optimistic view of the future), forgiveness, experiences of sense and meaning (i.e., moments of spiritual or philosophical reflection that confer purpose), and connectedness (i.e., being part of a larger whole, whether through relationships, community, or a universal connection).

Machiavellianism

Machiavellians are less impulsive than psychopaths, but share, perhaps to a lesser extent, deficits with them. Specifically, Machiavellians struggle with theory of mind, emotion recognition, affective empathy (i.e., ability to feel and share another person's emotions), and emotional intelligence (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010; Andrew et al., 2008; Jones, 2016; Michels & Schulze, 2021; Lyons et al., 2010; Pátkai & Bereczkei, 2016). These characteristics would predispose Machiavellians toward lower intrinsic religiosity, whereas their manipulativeness would predispose them toward higher extrinsic religiosity. Indeed, Machiavellianism is negatively related to intrinsic religiosity (Aghababaei et al., 2014), but positively related to extrinsic religiosity (Aghababaei et al., 2014, Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017). Machiavellianism is unrelated (Kämmerle et al., 2014) or negatively related (Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017) to general religiosity.

Narcissism

Similar to Machiavellians, narcissists, driven by their propensity for admiration-seeking (Sedikides, 2021), might present themselves to others as religious. Furthermore, their participation in religious practices might be motivated by a

desire for social validation (Abeyta et al., 2017). Consequently, narcissism is likely to exhibit negative associations with intrinsic religiosity, but positive associations with extrinsic religiosity.

The evidence has been largely consistent with this hypothesis. Narcissism is negatively related to intrinsic religiosity (assessed with various versions of the ROS; Aghababaei et al., 2014; Watson et al., 1984, 1987, 2004), although a study reported a positive relation between narcissism and intrinsic religiosity (measured with the Gorsuch and McPherson [1989] scale, based on the ROS) controlling for openness to change (Buzdar et al., 2019,). Also, narcissism is positively related to extrinsic religiosity (Hermann & Fuller, 2018; Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017; Watson et al., 2004), although one study reported a negative relation between these variables (Aghababaei et al., 2014).

Researchers have additionally examined the relation between narcissism and general religiosity. Some studies found that narcissism is unrelated or negatively related to general religiosity (Haddad et al., 2016; Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017). In addition, entitlement, a core component of narcissism, is unrelated or negatively related to potency of religious belief (i.e., the degree to which religious belief influences one's daily life—assessed with Blaine and Crocker's (1995) religiousness measure) and frequency of participation in religious practices (Exline et al., 2004—assessed with an abbreviated version of the Exline et al. (2000) scale). Yet, one study reported a positive association between narcissism and general religiosity (Daghigh et al., 2019—assessed with a version of Saroglou's (2011) Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale), and another study reported a null association between narcissism and general religiosity, along with positive associations between narcissism and three out of six dimension of religious and spiritual well-being (i.e., hope immanent, experiences of sense and meaning, and connectedness), after controlling for the shared variance of other Dark Triad traits (Kämmerle et al., 2014). Finally, narcissism is associated with religious overclaiming, the tendency to claim familiarity with religious concepts or principles that are bogus, that is, fabricated by the experimenter (Gebauer et al., 2012b).

Conclusion

The evidence, albeit sparse and fragmented, suggests a negative relation between the Dark Triad and intrinsic religiosity, and a positive relation between the Dark Triad and extrinsic religiosity. These result patterns, however, might be contingent upon cultural context. Religious belief and practices satisfy psychological needs to a different degree, depending on cultural context or the social value assigned to religion in such a context (Gebauer et al., 2012a, 2017; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2021). Extrinsic religiosity might be mostly beneficial to one's self-serving goals when it constitutes a strong cultural norm (Ebert et al., 2020; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2021). That is, extrinsic religiosity might be accentuated among psychopaths, Machiavellians, and narcissists in highly religious (vs. secular) cultures. Preliminary evidence is consistent with this hypothesis (Arli et al., 2019).

Cross-References

- ▶ Extrinsic Religious Orientation
- ▶ Intrinsic Religious Orientation

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