

## A Comparative Study Between the Dark Triad of Personality and the Big Five

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### Abstract

The “Dark Triad”, a constellation of three conceptually distinct but showing close correlates socially aversive personality variables, consisting of three triad members: Machiavellianism, narcissism and subclinical psychopathy, is an important research achievement in the area of the dark side of personality. This paper is to compare the rapidly expanding Dark Triad of personality and the popular Big Five Model, analyzing the complementarity in the theoretical field and the relationship between organizational behavior and personality trait in the empirical field. Future research should strengthen the research of the dark side of personality like Dark Triad, explore the role of situational variables and focus on negative and positive effects of personality traits.

**Key words:** Dark Triad; The Big Five; Organizational behavior; Complementarity; Comparison

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### INTRODUCTION

In the original paper, there are some personalities that are socially aversive but still within the normal range of functioning. Three variables were most prominent: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy.

According to Paulhus and Williams (2002), these three kinds of bad characters are named after the so-called Dark Triad. Last decade there are now dozens of studies on the Dark Triad and, according to Google Scholar, close to 400 citations, but no research into those three socially-averse personalities is currently available in China.

On the other hand, Big five personality is the mainstream personality theory at home and abroad and achieves a high recognition in personality psychology, and there is a lot of exploration on the model from different aspects. No research is into comparison between Dark Triad that is socially-averse and Big five personalities which represents the positive personality traits so far. And it is very meaningful for the comparative analysis between the positive and negative personality traits and helps us comprehensively understand the relationship and differences of different personality traits in two aspects in theory and practice.

### 1. DARK TRIAD AND THE BIG FIVE

Along with the development of the personality theory, scholars are not limited to the research of a single kind of personality traits but the personality clusters, and the Dark Triad traits are a typical representative. From the perspective of evolution, the reason for various kinds of personality traits to exist is that they can adapt to society and help to get the necessary means and methods for people’s survival and development. Prosocial personality traits pursue personal development in the popular form, such as agreeableness and conscientiousness, but antisocial personality traits achieve personal purpose through the disgusting form (Jonason & Webster, 2010).

Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy are three conceptually distinct but empirically overlapping personality variables, so ten years ago Paulhus and Williams (2002) sought to organize the literature to call attention to the Dark Triad. With the difference,

the Big Five is a summary on the basis of 16PF, and Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism are the five key factors and they have become the best paradigm of the Big Five Model.

## 2. COMPARISON OF THEORY

The Dark Triad and Big five personality all fall personalities clusters in the area of trait psychology and they are descriptive rather than interpreted personality models. Although they have in common in terms of personality types and models, the two personality traits have certain complementary to each other in such aspects as the description of the nature of personality.

In view of the relationship between them, many scholars divide the Dark Triad and Big five personality into the specific dimensions to explore the similarities and differences between them (e.g. Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010). All of the Big Five have been linked to one or more of the Dark Triad variables. Many studies consistently show that most consistently are negative associations with Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Jonason et al., 2010; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Douglas & Bore, 2012). Despite of the stable negative correlation, we don't tell Dark Triad is the low end of the Big Five. First, as Table

1 shows, when we do research on the relationship between Dark Triad and Openness to experience, Neuroticism and Extraversion, the results of the study is not the same in different studies. Second, the features of the three dark personalities are not the same as such as dimensions that are the low end of the Big Five, weak will, aimlessness and unreliability and so on. Even though negative links with Agreeableness are close, the correlation is not more than 0.5 (Machiavellianism -.47; narcissism -.36; psychopathy -.25) (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). When the concept Dark Triad was put forward, Paulhus and Williams (2002) put the dark personality clusters as the references of Big five personality. The only stable negative association with agreeableness and conscientiousness shows that Dark Triad and Big five personality lowly overlap. So they are different personality clusters and can realize the complementary when describing personality traits.

The Big Five tries to contain all kinds of personalities, but in fact positive language description make it be mainly used to describe positive personality traits so that it does not adequately describe the dark sides of personalities. This reality leaves a wide research space for dark personality traits (Qin & Xu, 2013). Dark Triad describes three kinds of antisocial personality traits that belong to the area of dark personality clusters and are an important research achievement. It breaks the theory frame of Big five personalities and makes personality theory be more rigorous and complete.

**Table 1**  
**Correlations of the Dark Triad With the Big Five**

Format	Openness	Conscientiousness	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Neuroticism	Cite
M		(-)		(-)		
N	(+)		(+)	(-)		Paulhua &
P	(+)	(-)	(+)	(-)	(-)	Williams, 2002
M		(-)		(-)	(+)	
N		(-)		(-)		Jakobwitz &
P-Psy				(-)	(+)	Egan, 2006
S-Psy		(-)		(-)	(+)	
M		(-)		(-)	(+)	
N		(-)	(+)	(-)		Douglas, Bore
P-Psy	(-)	(-)		(-)		et al., 2012
S-Psy		(-)	(-)	(-)	(+)	

*Note.* M: Machisvillianism, N: Narcissism, P: Psychopathy, P-Psy: Primary psychopathy, S-Psy: Secondary psychopathy, P-Psy and S-Psy are the two dimensions of P.

## 3. COMPARISON IN THE EMPIRICAL FIELD OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Big five personality gets more systematic and comprehensive empirical research in the field of industrial and organizational psychology and empirical studies into Dark Triad are focused on organizational

behavior field. The two personality models have a strong comparability in this respect and organization outputs have been a hot spot in the application field for a long time. For that reason, it is feasible and important for researchers to compare positive and dark personality clusters in the empirical field of organizational behavior.

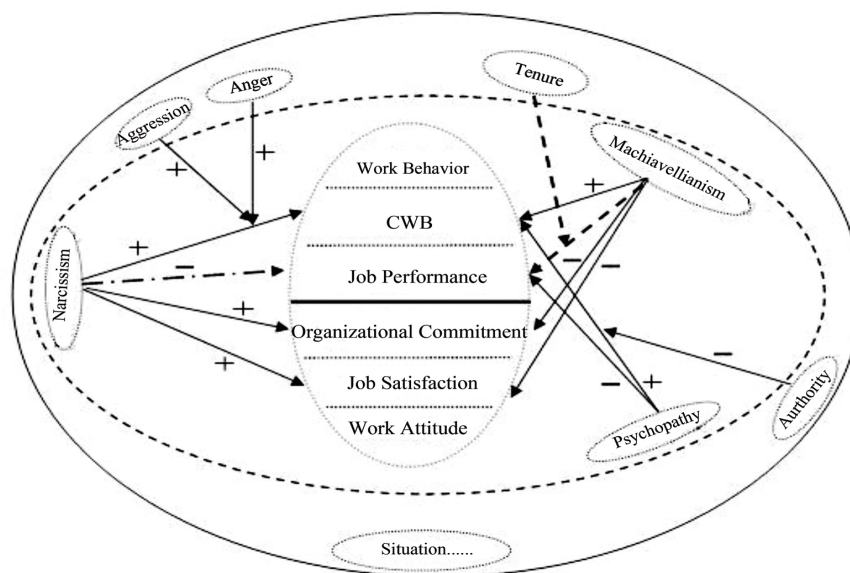
### 3.1 Stability and Consistency on Predicting Outputs

Because of the essence of dark personality clusters, it's difficult for Dark Triad to keep consistent results when predicting other outputs, in addition to positive links with counterproductive work behavior (see Figure 1). This unstable correlation is associated with its nature. For example, Narcissists feel fine about themselves and exaggerate their own achievements, and their superior gives rise to high organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Jonason et al., 2012), but arrogance may hinder the performance ascension. Psychopathy is passed for the "darkest" personality variables, so it normally keeps negative effect on outputs or not. By contrast, Machiavellians who are regarded as the chameleon entirely centre on the purpose of gaining goals, and have inconsistent links with job performance. The early environment in which the personality takes shape may cause this feature. Although all three dark personality variables are influenced by genetic and not shared environment, shared environment has a more significant impact on Machiavellianism (Rauthmann, 2011; Veselka, Schermer, & Vernon, 2011). In addition to the characteristics of the personality itself, Situational factors significantly affect the stability and consistency (Zettler & Solga, 2013), and Machiavellian feature itself to a certain extent explains the role of situational factors.

In contrast, Big five personality shows good stability and consistency when predicting work outputs, five positive personality variables are significantly associated with employee' well-being. Despite of different organizational background and performance criteria,

Conscientiousness has a stable and effective effect on individual behavior, leadership behavior, influence and team performance (Zhang & Xiong, 2012). Although the links between Extraversion, Agreeableness and career interest, job performance are only limited to the specific profession or performance indicators, but dependency with specific career or performance indicators is certain (Zhong & Duan, 2004). Overall, Big five personalities have a good predictive validity, besides the validity that Openness to experience predicting outcome variables is not always stable.

If various outputs of Big five personality in organizational situations embodied in an act of "consistency" across situations, Dark Triad only highlights consistency across situations. The former puts up consistent or the same when predicting organizational behavior, while the latter can only be called behavioral style or similar properties rather than the same. The two personality models belong to trait theory and maintain the stable style in different situations, but compared with Dark Triad, the difference is that Big five personality maintains consistent behavior. Individual behaviors result from the interaction between environmental pressure and individual intrinsic quality. People show different behaviors under different circumstances, and the reason may be that individuals meet the needs of the environment (Wang & Cui, 2006). Environmental factors can explain the differences on stability and consistency when Dark Triad and Big five personality predict outcome variables. And from the above comparison, Dark Triad is more significantly influenced by environmental factors, especially the Machiavellianism.



**Figure 1**  
**Correlation Model of the Dark Triad With Work-Related Behavior and Attitude**

Note. --- Positive or negative links are both possible, -- Correlation is not significant.

From an evolutionary point of view, whether positive or negative personality traits are adaptive in our society (Penke et al., 2007), and no personality trait is universally adaptive or maladaptive. Although the negative effects of Dark Triad are clearly and naturally, the existence of its own shows that it has adaptability during evolution (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and its positive role that are popular with us in some situations. It also means Dark Triad is closely linked to environmental factors and more likely to show different performance in different environment.

### 3.2 Prediction Effect on Negative Outputs

The Big Five as comprehensive personality clusters has a significant role when describing positive personality traits and predicting positive behaviors (Douglas & Bore, 2012). But it does not have good description when referring to personalities that are socially aversive (Scherer et al., 2013; Douglas & Bore, 2012) and is difficult to effectively predict the negative behaviors. Psychopathy is superior to the big five personality in predicting counterproductive work behaviors (Scherer et al., 2013) and interpersonal relationship interpersonal behaviors are effectively explained while using the Big Five Model In the stress situation. Stability and consistency of predicting CWB have proved its own advantages in predicting negative outputs. Predictive validity of Big five personality is not high, maybe the reason is that it is too broad. As a comprehensive group of personality traits, Big five personality has become a kind of inclusive personality psychology framework (Qin & Xu, 2013), but for non-clinical study, compared with the Big Five personality system, Dark Triad is more specific and “professional” and is only around the subclinical personality. From the point of view of pertinence, it should be normal that Dark Triad that is undivided and specifically has a better predictive validity than positive personality traits. In general, Dark Triad is more effective than Big five personality in predicting negative outputs (Jonason et al., 2009; Judge et al., 2006), and can supply the gap of Big five personality in the empirical field of organizational behavior.

### 3.3 Inverted U-Shaped Relation With Work Outputs

It is right that linear model is used to describe the relationship between predictors and criterion in the organizational behavior research which refers to individual knowledge, ability and skills, but it does not mean that score of the participants is higher, the effect is better when personality variables are involved. In fact, lots of work personality variables do not keep a linear correlation but inverted u-shaped relation with work outputs.

Recent studies on Dark Triad have confirmed that the predictors often show up inverted u-shaped relation with outcome variables (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). Zettler

and Solga (2013) divided the job performance into task performance and organizational citizenship behavior, and put forward the inverted u-shaped model to understand the relationship between Machiavellianism and job performance. And the result showed the asymmetric inverted u-shaped relation between the variables. In view of relationship with the environment and the inner correlation of Dark Triad, Machiavellianism may keep inverted u-shaped relation with other organizational outputs and narcissism (even psychopathy) and job performance can appear this links (Zettler & Solga, 2013).

In a lot of variables, it is easier for Dark Triad to appear inverted u-shaped relation with performance that the environment and personality traits have a greater impact on. This kind of situation for the Big Five also exists. Studies show that Agreeableness in moderate levels is appropriate for the efficiency of customer relationship, too high or too low but hinders the working efficiency (Zhang & Xiong, 2012). Although Conscientiousness has a positive impact under different organizational background and performance criteria, but it embodies a negative role in too high level. And in terms of Extraversion, Barry and Stewart (1997) had proved that the relationship is inverted u-shaped with team performance.

There are dark and bright personality traits in our society (Judge & LePine, 2007), and positive and negative personality traits are both able to adapt to the social environment (Penke et al., 2007). It is easy to understand two kinds of personality variables may keep a curve relation with some outcome variables in some degree, and different situations and traits can lead to distinct performance.

Although the two kinds of personality clusters both have a certain degree of curve effect, but the differences still exist. This nonlinear relationship exists while studying their links between Extraversion, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness with specific outputs (Zhang & Xiong, 2012), and it is relatively single, stable and consistent. Individual behaviors depend on the personality characteristics and environment (Wang & Cui, 2006), and maybe the degree affected by environment variables is the key to explaining this situation. As mentioned above, Dark Triad is closely linked with the situational factors, so this kind of curve effect may be more complex and obvious. A recent study about Dark Triad also has confirmed that the curve relationship often appears between predictors and outcome variables (Grant & Schwartz, 2011).

### 3.4 Adaptability and Inadaptability

Judge et al. (2009) put forward an idea on dark side of dark personality and bright side of dark personality, and think that dark personality traits may reduce the leadership and may also improve leadership. This situation is called “traits dilemma”, namely the negative personality traits is affected by the situation and degree of personality traits

at the same time. Studies appear that the situation that the adaptability and inadaptability exist side by side is appropriate for Dark Triad. And as a representative of the positive personality traits, Big five personality more or less is in the face of "dilemma".

Dark Triad is antisocial and socially aversive personality clusters, and inadaptability is inherent. But recent research has turned to its adaptability and revealed its advantages. Persons who belong to Dark Triad are successful in certain occupations (e.g., performance) and certain areas (Jonason et al., 2009), and some of them are executives and CEOs. Three dark personality traits also reflect some popular characters, such as charm, leadership, courage and impression management skills. Belschak et al. (2013) showed that Machiavellians put up high adaptability and sincerely cooperate with others when it is beneficial for them. And Narcissism has positive effects on well-being and organizational outcomes (Judge, Piccolo & Kosalka, 2009). What is more, Psychopathy keeps a positive link with leadership style (creativity, good strategic thinking and communication skills) in the internal rating (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010).

Adaptability is dominated in the study on Big five personality, but this personality is still not adaptive in some respects. The result by meta-analysis proves that individuals who are high Openness to experience are more likely to take risks and get in trouble (Baumeister & Smart, 1996). If Conscientiousness is too high, it brings about rigidity of thinking, lack of flexibility and social adaptability. There is a negative link between Extraversion and attention of a team in the task, that is to say, the more extroverted individuals are, the more difficultly teams concentrate on the task (Zhang & Xiong, 2012). Although Agreeableness is widely accepted by society, but high agreeableness may hinder the work efficiency and have no real help to solve the problem, due to the tendency to avoid conflict (Suls et al., 1998). Neuroticism reflects the individual's emotional stability, and studies show that it has a negative effect on individual behavior and goes against personal career success, even emotional stability may not avoid failure because of ignoring early risks.

We can seek answers from the match between personality and situation to understand these two kinds of personality clusters in terms of unity of adaptability and inadaptability. Judge and LePine (2007) suggested that dark side and bright side of personality should be equally important. No personality trait is universally adaptive or maladaptive. The personality itself has no absolutely good or bad, and Dark Triad and Big five personality are both the results of evolution. It is widely believed that personality and circumstance both have an important influence on individual behaviors. From this perspective, to a certain extent, adaptability and inadaptability mean while personality matches with environment or not.

And the adaptability of two kinds of personality clusters means personality traits meet the requirements of the environment, vice versa. It should be pointed out that, although the two has the uniformity in this aspect, the unity is conditional. This conclusion is established in a particular environment or some special fields. In addition, inadaptability of Big five personality focuses on specific outputs and it is relatively stable and less influenced by situational factors. But Dark triad doesn't keep a stable adaptability and its positive role is affected by the situation and time factor at the same time.

It is not easy for Dark Triad to show the negative effect in a short period (Harms et al., 2011), but as time goes on, negative effect highlights and individuals who are successful in some ways fail in the end (Furnham, 2010; Hogan, 2007).

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#### 4. FUTURE RESEARCH

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Personality research has made significant progress, but there are still some problems to be solved and future research can be focused on:

First and foremost, research should be strengthened on dark personality traits, especially Dark Triad. Big five personality is criticized because of not fully summarizing the existing personality traits, particularly those antisocial personality traits and too much attention to this positive personality model can limit personality research. Dark triad has got more and more attention in the field of organizational psychology since the concept is put forward. The role of positive and negative personality traits should be equally important, future research should more focus on dark personality clusters to expand the personality theory.

Second, it is necessary to deeply explore situational factors and one might test whether the curvilinear effect exists in the larger range. In view of the complex relation between personality variables and work outputs, the linear model is not always appropriate, and the inverted u-shaped model provides a new thinking. So future research may test whether the curvilinear effect of Dark Triad and Big five personality hold for other important outcomes such as salary, promotion or job satisfaction given that respective research has, to the best of our knowledge, not tested for possible curvilinear relations so far.

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