

## **Dark Triad Personality Traits: Evaluation of Self versus Others among Employees in Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The major organizational research streamline has been directed towards understanding the nature, causes, and consequences of positive work behavior. In the workplace, however, negative work behavior is also a concern to many employees. Past literature found that various factors contribute to the occurrence of these dark behaviors. Negative personality traits, especially the Dark Triad, have been found to be significant predictors to the dark behaviors. Despite the numerous investigations, little attempt has been done to examine the evaluation of oneself and others on the Dark Triad traits. Therefore, this study aims at to fulfill the gap guided by the following research questions: to what extent do employees believe that they possess the Dark Triad traits and to what extent do employees favorably rate themselves possessing less Dark Triad traits compared to their colleagues at work? Paired data were collected from a sample of 64 part time MBA students from a large Malaysian university who work in various industries. Results of frequency analysis and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test show that respondents believed that they possessed the Dark Triad traits, and they rated highly on themselves rather than the known others on all components of the Dark Triad traits. Implications of the findings and future study recommendations were discussed.

*Keywords: Dark Triad, Personality Traits, Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the ancient time, scholars had developed an interest in understanding people's personality (Crocq, 2013). The emergence of modern personality psychology, however, started in 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ellis, Abrams, & Abrams, 2009). There are many research works focusing on understanding the nature of positive personality traits such as the Big Five and happy personality traits, its antecedents and consequences, and the underlying mechanisms that help to explain the relationship between various constructs and the positive personality traits. On the contrary, the negative personality traits attract scholars' attention only at later years (Harms & Spain, 2015).

Among the negative personality traits, Dark Triad receives the most attention within organizational research. Spain, Harms, and LeBreton (2014) review the utilities of the dark personality traits, which include the Dark Triad, and found that these traits affect job attitudes, job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, and creative performance. They also found that the dark personality traits affect several human resources functions such as training and interviewing. Interest in understanding the effect of the dark

personality traits, especially the Dark Triad, also emerges in relation to leadership (e.g., Kiazad, Restubog, Zagenczyk, Kiewitz, & Tang, 2010; Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014).

Despite the increasing number of studies on the Dark Triad traits, little attempt has been done to examine the evaluation of oneself and others on the Dark Triad traits. Understanding how a person evaluates himself possessing these traits relative to others is important for organizational researchers and practitioners to take necessary actions in overcoming the traits' adverse effects at the workplace. Therefore, this study aims at to fulfill this gap by addressing the following research questions: to what extent do employees believe that they possess the Dark Triad traits and to what extent do employees favorably rate themselves possessing less Dark Triad traits compared to their colleagues at work?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW ON DARK TRIAD**

The major organizational research streamline has been directed towards understanding the nature, causes, and consequences of positive work behavior. In the workplace, however, negative work behavior is also a concern to many employees. Past literature found that various factors contribute to the occurrence of these dark behaviors (e.g., Chen & King, 2018; Mitchell, Baer, Ambrose, Folger, & Palmer, 2018). One of these factors is negative personality traits, especially the Dark Triad traits (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniels, 2012).

Dark Triad traits refer to the constellation of three socially aversive personality traits, which are Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). A person who possesses the Machiavellianism trait is known to be someone who will do anything to win; that is, ends justify the means (Scandura, 2017). They are the ones who believe that people can be manipulated and doing so is permissible in realizing a targeted goal (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Scandura, 2017). Narcissism refers to the expression of grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and superiority (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). It also reflects the self-serving bias in which a person will attribute success to himself but failures to others (Emmons, 1987). Unlike Machiavellianism and narcissism, psychopathy is the extreme socially aversive trait in the Dark Triad traits. A person who possesses this trait has no feelings of guilt, is impulsive, and seeks immediate gratification of his needs (Scandura, 2017). Therefore, psychopathy is defined as characters with high impulsivity, thrill-seeking, and having low empathy and anxiety (Paulhus & Williams, 2002).

Although narcissism and psychopathy can be found in clinical studies involving individuals under clinical or forensic supervisions, the two traits have been studied using broader community samples known as subclinical samples (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Hence, to distinguish these traits under different conditions, subclinical narcissism and subclinical psychopathy are referred to when the traits are studied using broader community samples. These two subclinical traits are combined together with Machiavellianism to form the Dark Triad traits. Paulhus and Williams (2002) argue that the three traits are distinct constructs but they overlap with each other to some extent. In particular, the three traits represent *socially malevolent traits with behavior tendency toward self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity, and aggressiveness* (p.557), but Paulhus and Williams found that the three constructs of Dark Triad traits are distinctive when measured with the normal population. Therefore, the three constructs were examined separately in the present study.

Numerous evidences show that these three traits are commonly found in the workplace (Cohen, 2018). Jonason, Slomski, and Partyka (2012) argue that it is no surprise to find employees

with Dark Triad traits in the workplace because these traits are not immediately visible during a short period of employment interview. Coined as toxic employees, the authors also contend that these employees survive in organizations through their “desirable” personalities (e.g., charm and assertiveness) and their ability to use different tactics to influence others in the workplace.

Since 2002, there is an exponential growth of research on Dark Triad traits in organizational research. A search hit in Google Scholar with key terms “Dark Triad” and “workplace” shows that there are 1,710 published articles. The research streams on this phenomenon can be divided into understanding the nature of the Dark Triad traits (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002), identifying its antecedents and consequences (e.g., Kiazad et al., 2010), and explaining its underlying mechanism (e.g., Giammarco & Vernon, 2014). Although most of the studies on Dark Triad traits focus on its relation to antisocial work behavior, some studies also focus on its beneficial impact to organizational members (e.g., Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012; Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2014).

In terms of tapping into the Dark Triad traits, majority of previous studies asked the respondents to rate themselves on the given items (e.g., Giammarco & Vernon, 2014; Mathieu et al., 2014). That is, Dark Triad traits had been measured through self-rated questionnaires. There are also some isolated attempts to measure the Dark Triad through the lens of self and others. For example, Rauthmann and Kolar (2012) examine the lay persons’ perception on Dark Triad traits from two different perspectives (i.e., self versus others) on three criterions (i.e., desirability, consequences for the self, and consequences for others). Data were gathered from 244 respondents. They found that the respondents discriminated the responses between a self- and other-perspective. The respondents also reported that there were favorable consequences towards themselves when others exhibited Machiavellianism or psychopathy, but neutral or detrimental effects on self when they exhibited these traits. In addition, all three traits were reported to be less desirable for the self than for others. Also, respondents had the tendency to judge the consequences of their own behavior less detrimental than when others did.

Although Rauthmann and Kolar (2012) provide some insights into the difference between self-rated and other-rated Dark Triad scores, their primary interest was to understand the effects of exhibiting Dark Triad traits by self and others. In the present study, the aim is to investigate how an individual assesses himself as compared to his assessment on others. This is important because self-enhancement principle and Social Comparison Theory specify that one is more likely to assess oneself positively and others negatively. Furthermore, the definitions of the Dark Triad components entail the same; that is, believing that one is dominant, more important, and self-love most probably support the ideas that oneself does not exhibit the dark traits compare to others.

The above argument is in line with Brown’s (1986). According to Brown, his series of experimental studies show that all respondents had pervasive tendency to highlight self positively and less negatively compared to their evaluation on others. In addition, he also found that the respondents rated more positively when evaluating friends than others. His work, however, used ten bipolar positively and negatively valance trait adjectives. Therefore, it is interesting to identify whether the same outcomes can be observed when measuring the Dark Triad traits.

## **UNDERPINNING THEORIES**

Two theories were used as the underpinning theories. Self-enhancement theory was used to address the first research question, whereas Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) was used to address the second research question.

Self-enhancement is one of the well-established constructs in the organizational behavior and industrial psychology literature. Commonly known with the motive to highlight oneself favorably in the eyes of people, self-enhancement is defined as *a person's inherent motivation to have others perceive him or her favorably) such as being competent, attractive, lucky, ethical, and important* (McShane & Von Glinow, 2018: 66). Research has shown that self-enhancement is important to narcissists because it reflects their importance, grandiosity, and competency (John & Robbins, 1994). Therefore, it is expected that people with high narcissism will rate themselves more favorably than when they rate others.

Because no research has shown that self-enhancement is related to Machiavellianism and psychopathy, the present study also draws on the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) to explain the reasoning behind the proposed research questions. Social Comparison Theory suggests that people have an innate drive to compare themselves relative to others in order to make an accurate evaluation about them. Kwan (2004) further argues that the theory is useful to explain why people perceive themselves more positively than they perceive others.

Later works on Social Comparison Theory identifies that there are two comparing processes, which are an upward or a downward comparison (e.g., Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). In the upward comparison, a person may compare himself to other who is superior to him, such as managers who compare a pay increase with a CEO's pay (Gartenberg & Wulf, 2017). On the contrary, a downward comparison specifies that a person who compares himself to other who is worse off than he is to make him feels better about himself. In this case, a person is more likely to make a downward comparison than an upward comparison when he feels threatened by certain characteristics in question (Hakmiller, 1966). Research has shown that by adopting the downward comparison, a person increases his self-enhancement (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990). On the basis of this line of argument, it is expected that employees with Dark Triad traits will use a downward comparison than an upward comparison.

## **METHOD**

The present study was part of a larger study on understanding the effects of Dark Triad traits on workplace behavior. Data for this study were gathered from 64 part-time MBA students from a large Malaysian university who work in various industries. These students were chosen as respondents because they were working adults who might have some experiences in dealing with everyday work hassles and events. In addition, they are appropriate cases for the present study because the aim of this study is to identify how a respondent evaluate himself as compared to how he evaluates other. The students have known each other for two semesters, which allows them to get to know each other to some extent.

Using a survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate their scores on the Dark Triad traits for both themselves and a known other. To avoid possible biases, each respondent was asked to rate themselves first during the first class meeting. Only in the third class meeting, which took place two weeks after the first class meeting, the respondents were asked to rate a known other

using the same set of the survey questionnaire. The only difference in the survey questionnaires was the demographic information. In the first phase, information about the respondent was collected. In the second phase, no information about the known other was collected except gender, which was identified *a priori* before data collection. The first exercise was done using paper-and-pencil questionnaire and the second exercise was conducted via online survey. The known other is defined as a person who takes the same course and in the same class with a respondent. To ease the data collection, questionnaire distribution during the first phase was done when the respondents sat in groups. The membership of the groups remains the same until the end of the course; hence, it is easier for the researcher to avoid assigning a respondent as a known other. An identifier code was used to identify a respondent without revealing much information to minimize the possibility of anyone recognizing who the respondent was. Also, a known other was identified first before the respondents provided their feedbacks. In this situation, a respondent had no control to choose who they wished to rate.

The measures used in this study was the Dirty Dozen developed by Jonathan and Webster (2010). There were 12 items tapping into three components of the Dark Triad traits, with four items each for Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. A sample item for Machiavellianism is *I tend to manipulate others to get my way*, whereas a sample item for narcissism is *I tend to want others to admire me*. A sample item for psychopathy was *I tend to lack remorse*. All items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

The items included in the demographic information obtained from the respondents are gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, industry, sector, highest education attained, and working experience. The only information obtained about a known other is gender, which the information was derived from class lists. When rating the known other, a slight modification was made to the 12 items of Dirty Dozen. For example, the original item for narcissism was changed from *I tend to want others to admire me* to *He/she wants others to admire him/her*.

## RESULTS

Among the respondents, 55% were male and 45% were female. The ages of respondents ranged from 23 to 51 years, with a mean age of 33.9 years. Most of the respondents were Malay (53%) and the rests came from various ethnicity. The highest education attained was a Bachelor degree (88%), followed by a Master degree (12%). A large number of respondents worked in public sector (48%) and private sector (41%), whereas only 11% were self-employed. Their occupations and industries varies. The average working experience was 9.2 years (*S.D.* = 6.16).

Table 1 shows the frequency analysis for item scores for each components of the Dirty Dozen based on self perspective. The first four items belong to narcissism, and majority of the respondents reported that they had the tendency to wanting others to admire them (51.6%) and also to pay attention to them (40.6%). The next four items describe psychopathy. The highest frequency was *tend to be cynical* with 14.1%. The least frequency score for self-evaluated psychopathy was the tendency not to be too concerned with morality. Machiavellianism was captured by the last four items in Table 1. The least frequency was reported for using deceit or lying to get to one's way. Looking at the other end of the scale, the frequencies for all four items were slightly different, with using flattery to get to one's way having the highest frequency of 6.3%.

**Table 1: Item Frequency for Self-Evaluation**

<b>Dirty Dozen Items</b>	<b>Response Frequency (%)</b>				
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Tend to want others to admire	15.6	14.1	18.8	39.1	12.5
Tend to want others to pay attention	10.9	9.4	39.1	25.0	15.6
Tend to expect special favors from others	20.3	15.6	39.1	17.2	7.8
Tend to seek prestige or status	17.2	20.3	35.9	18.8	7.8
Tend to lack remorse	34.4	29.7	26.6	9.4	0
Tend to be callous or insensitive	45.3	21.9	20.3	12.5	0
Tend to be not too concerned with morality	43.8	26.6	17.2	9.4	3.1
Tend to be cynical	35.9	26.6	20.3	14.1	3.1
Used deceit or lied to get a way	50.0	34.4	10.9	4.7	0
Tend to manipulate others to get a way	46.9	39.1	9.4	4.7	0
Used flattery to get a way	45.3	32.8	15.6	6.3	0
Exploit others towards own end	51.6	29.7	15.6	3.1	0

Table 2 also shows the frequency analysis on the Dirty Dozen items, but for other evaluation perspective. Of the four items on narcissism, the highest frequency was reported for the tendency to wanting others to pay attention (18.8%). The least narcissism characteristic frequency score was found for the tendency to seek prestige or status (81.3%). The response frequency for items belonging to psychopathy suggests that a large number of respondents rated their known others as having low level of psychopathy. The highest frequency score was the tendency not to be too concerned with morality (90.7%), whereas the lowest frequency score was the tendency to be callous and insensitive (3.1%). The same frequency pattern is observed for Machiavellianism. The item with the highest frequency score was the respondents' disagreement that the known others used deceit or lied to get their ways (93.8%). The lowest frequency scores were shared between using flattery to get a way and exploiting others towards one's own end, with a frequency of 1.6% each.

By looking at the two tables superficially, one may conclude that the two evaluation perspectives are different, with more respondents admitting that they possessed the Dark Triad traits than their known others do. To test the significance of the two evaluation perspectives, a test on comparison was used. Although paired sample *t*-test is the common approach to analyze the present data, a preliminary analysis on the 64 study cases showed that none of the constructs follows a normal distribution. Therefore, a non-parametric approach was used in the next analysis. In particular, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used to compare the score for each component of the Dark Triad traits based on the evaluation perspective.

**Table 2: Item Frequency for Other Evaluation**

Dirty Dozen Items	Response Frequency (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Tend to want others to admire	20.3	42.2	26.6	10.9	0
Tend to want others to pay attention	18.8	37.5	25.0	18.8	0
Tend to expect special favors from others*	25.0	45.3	18.8	9.4	0
Tend to seek prestige or status	26.6	54.7	10.9	7.8	0
Tend to lack remorse*	32.8	46.9	17.2	1.6	0
Tend to be callous or insensitive	38.9	46.9	14.1	3.1	0
Tend to be not too concerned with morality	46.9	43.8	9.4	0	0
Tend to be cynical*	39.1	51.6	7.8	0	0
Used deceit or lied to get a way	62.5	31.3	6.3	0	0
Tend to manipulate others to get a way	56.3	34.4	6.3	3.1	0
Used flattery to get a way	59.4	31.3	7.8	1.6	0
Exploit others towards own end	50.0	39.1	9.4	1.6	0

Note. Asterisk (\*) marks the presence of a missing value in the item.

When comparing self-evaluation and other evaluation on narcissism measure, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed a statistically significant reduction in narcissism score,  $z = -3.946$ ,  $p < 0.000$  with a medium effect size ( $r = 0.35$ ). The median score on narcissism decreased from self-evaluation ( $Md = 2.73$ ) to other evaluation ( $Md = 2.046$ ). Similar results were obtained for psychopathy. Specifically, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed a statistically significant reduction in psychopathy score,  $z = -4.235$ ,  $p < 0.000$  with a medium effect size ( $r = 0.37$ ). The medium score on psychopathy decreased from self-evaluation ( $Md = 2.17$ ) to other evaluation ( $Md = 1.67$ ). A statistically significant reduction in score was also found in Machiavellianism,  $z = -2.823$ ,  $p < 0.005$  with a small effect size ( $r = 0.25$ ). The median score on Machiavellianism decreased from self-evaluation ( $Md = 1.80$ ) to other evaluation ( $Md = 1.40$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The main objective of the present study was to examine the evaluation of oneself and others on the Dark Triad traits. Two research questions were proposed, which are: to what extent do employees believe that they possess the Dark Triad traits and to what extent do employees favorably rate themselves possessing less Dark Triad traits compared to their colleagues at work?

As shown in the frequency analysis, employee-respondents in this study believed that they possessed the Dark Triad traits. Of the three traits, they were more likely to report having narcissistic traits than Machiavellianism and psychopathy. A probable reason is the items tapping into narcissism are commonly occurred in workplaces. Wanting others to admire, to pay attention, to expect special favors from others, and to seek prestige and status are desires of many when working with a group of people. Therefore, these characteristics may be seen as normal and admitting it will not have any adverse effect on the respondents.

On the contrary, items tapping into Machiavellianism and psychopathy are more intense. It is speculated that, if it is true, the respondents might not want to disclose that they were on the dark side and be condemned for having those traits. Alternatively, it is also possible that morality and culture play important roles in shaping the respondents' traits. That is, they were not Machiavellists or psychopaths because being these toxic people go against the moral principle and the collectivist culture of Malaysians. Another explanation could be derived from the fact that the respondents rated themselves highly on narcissism. Being a narcissist, a person has an inherent motivation to have others perceive him or her favorably such as being ethical (McShane & Von Glinow, 2018). Admitting or reporting themselves having Machiavellianism and psychopathy traits will make them look unethical. Therefore, the first research question receives quite substantial answer. That is, the employee-respondents in the present study believe that they had narcissistic traits but not so much on the other two Dark Triad traits. Future researchers are encouraged to investigate the influence of morality, ethics, and culture on Dark Triad traits.

The second research question was addressed using the results obtained from the Wilcoxon-Signed Rank Test. Interestingly, it was found that the results did not support the theorizing based on self-enhancement and Social Comparison Theory (Ferstinger, 1954). Although there was statistically significant difference in evaluation perspective, the employee-respondents rated known others more favorably than themselves on Dark Triad traits. The reductions in median scores were significant for all three traits. One justification relates to the fact that the respondents were asked to rate known others. As found in Brown (1986), respondents have the tendency to rate positively when evaluating friends. In the present study, the respondents had known their classmates for two semesters. This duration is long enough for the respondents to befriend their classmates, and, thus, they had the tendency to rate the known others positively. The findings here provide an interesting research avenue for future researchers to investigate the moderating effect of workplace friendship on the relationship between Dark Triad traits and work behaviors.

## **Implications**

This study suggests that when measuring Dark Triad traits using a battery test, respondents are more likely to report their narcissism than Machiavellianism and psychopathy. It also suggests that respondents are less likely to rate their known others negatively. Therefore, the present study supports the utility of self-enhancement principle in explaining why respondents rate themselves having narcissism trait, but does not support the Social Comparison Theory (Ferstinger, 1954). In particular, the utility of the Social Comparison Theory may be visible if researchers look into the effect of evaluating others who are unknown to employees or when taking into account the moderating effects of several variables such as workplace friendship, morality, and culture.

Practically, managers must be aware of the differences in evaluation perspective. In cases of complaints and performance evaluation, for example, managers must make sure that the remarks or points are not distorted by the complainers' or evaluators' Dark Triad traits. This problem can be overcome by giving a series of test to employees to assess their Dark Triad traits, and then to profile the employees, accordingly. Although it is not possible to remove the toxic employees from the workplace, their dark behaviors can be suppressed. Also, encouraging workplace friendship could be helpful in regulating the toxic employees' perception of others in the workplace.



## Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, this study used small sample of 64 cases. Having small sample size limits the chances of using parametric approach, which may results in more powerful test. This limitation can be overcome if the data collection period is prolonged so that more responses can be gathered or if the research is conducted in a large organization with many employees. Despite this limitation, the 64 cases allow the researcher to achieve the objective of the study. That is, the researcher could make sure that random assignment of known others be done and the responses were more reliable compared to having the respondents chose their own persons to be evaluated.

Another limitation relates to assessing Dark Triad traits descriptively. Although this approach meets the objective of the present study, future researchers may further explore the Dark Triad's issue by investigating its relationships to work attitudes and work behaviors using a complex model. In relation to the present study, using descriptive approach is appropriate as it meets the research objective. Furthermore, as the present study is only part of a larger research project, the study is good as it is. In expanding the study on Dark Triad traits, future researchers may take into consideration how Dark Triad traits should be assessed. Should it be assessed from the respondents' perspective or observers' perspective? Both perspectives have merits and demerits, and it is up to future researchers to choose the best possible option that could minimize self-serving biases.

One last limitation relates to the measurement scale used. The present study used the Dirty Dozen (Jonathan & Webster, 2010). Using a 12-item scale will have higher retention rate among respondents, especially when the issue in question is sensitive, but it will not be able to capture a larger domain of the constructs. Alternatively, future researchers may use the Short Dark Triad scale or SD3 developed by Jones and Paulhus (2014). Albeit shorter, this scale has more items compared to the Dirty Dozen.

## CONCLUSION

Employees with Dark Triad traits exist in all workplaces. Organizational members will not be able to identify them as their true colors are often hidden behind their charming and charismatic personality. These employees have difficulties in admitting themselves possessing the Dark Triad traits, especially if they are high on Machiavellianism and psychopathy. In addition, their evaluation tends to be inconsistent depending on whether they are evaluating themselves or other persons. By understanding how they evaluate the Dark Triad traits, management can take necessary actions to minimize any adverse effect resulting from the toxic employees' behaviors.

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