

Bad News for Conservatives? Moral Judgments and the Dark Triad Personality Traits: A Correlational Study

Abstract: This experiment examined correlations between ethical value judgments on a 17-item Moral Intuition Survey (MSI), and scores on the Short D3 “Dark Triad” Personality Inventory – a measure of three related “dark and socially destructive” personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. 160 participants (90 male, 69 female, 1 transgendered; median age 31) were recruited online through Mechanical Turk and Yale Experiment Month web advertisements. Responses to each MIS item were hypothesized to be “conservative” or “liberal,” in line with traditional public divides on each issue. All but one of these hypothesized categorizations were statistically confirmed via correlations with demographic results. Five out of 12 (or 41.6%) of possible conservative responses had at least one positive correlation with Short D3 constructs, with three conservative response-types correlating significantly with two Short D3 constructs. In contrast, only one out of 12 (or 8.3%) of possible liberal responses had a positive correlation with Short D3 scores. We believe that our experiment thus raises serious questions about the personality bases of ethical judgments, and the relationship of conservative judgments to “dark” personality traits in particular.

1. Introduction

Commonsense suggests a strong relationship between personality traits and ethical value judgments. History is particularly suggestive in this regard. Consider just a few notable figures:

- Adolf Hitler (mass murderer) – *notable personality trait(s):* “counteractive narcissism,” a type that is stimulated by real or imagined insult or injury (Murray 1938); *notable ethical judgment(s):* profoundly anti-semitic.
- Thomas Hobbes (political philosopher) – *notable personality trait(s):* famous for claiming that, “my mother gave birth to twins: myself and fear”; *notable ethical judgment(s):* believed that the purpose of government is to protect people from fear, mutual mistrust, and anarchy (Hobbes 1651).

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau (political philosopher) – *notable personality trait(s)*: notoriously vain, ungrateful, and paranoid (Rousseau 1782); *notable ethical judgment(s)*: moral and political philosophy focused on inequality and envy (Rousseau 1754, 1762).
- Immanuel Kant (philosopher) – *notable personality trait(s)*: famous for living such a strict and predictable life that his neighbors reportedly set their clocks according to his morning walks; *notable ethical judgment(s)*: held that morality is fundamentally a matter of rigorous conformity to *universal law* (Kant 1785).

These are just a few suggestive cases, but the kinds of connections between personality and moral judgment they suggest seem plausible. Who among us, for example, doesn't know a selfish person who has rather selfish moral views? Alas, experimental research on the relationship between ethical judgments and personality is still very much in its infancy (see e.g. Graham et al. 2009).

Our experiment examined correlations between ethical value judgments on a short but diverse array of social, political, and economic issues, and scores on the Short D3 personality inventory, which measures three “dark and socially destructive” personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus and Williams 2002). Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy are all, to put it mildly, personality traits that most of us do not admire – and for good reason. Machiavellianism, after all, is a tendency to deceive and manipulate (Paulhus and Williams 2002; Gunnthorsdottir et al. 2002); narcissism a tendency to vanity, conceit, selfishness, feelings of entitlement, difficulty with empathy, and lack of guilt or remorse (Thomas 2010); and psychopathy

tendencies to impulsiveness, irresponsibility, and lack of foresight, guilt, remorse, and normal empathy (Semple 2005: 448-9). Indeed, we typically use these terms to criticize people. We say things like, “You can’t trust him. He’s a psychopath”, and, “You can’t depend on her. She’s a narcissist, and only cares about herself” – and, although the term “Machiavellianism” is uncommon, we of course do say things like, “Watch your back – he’s a manipulator, and a liar.” Finally, research indicates that, “To varying degrees, all three constructs entail a dark, socially destructive character with behavior tendencies such as grandiosity, emotional coldness, manipulation and aggressiveness.” (Paulhus and Williams 2002). Although the Short D3 only measures these traits at a sub-clinical level (Paulhus and Williams 2002), we believe that even at a subclinical level, all three traits are widely recognized to be morally worrisome. After all, most of us tend in ordinary life not to admire even *sub*-clinical Machiavellians, narcissists, or psychopaths. We do not admire people who have even mild to moderate tendencies to deceive and manipulate (Machiavellianism); tendencies to grandeur, vanity, conceit, selfishness, and entitlement (narcissism); or tendencies to impulsiveness, irresponsibility, lack of foresight, difficulty with empathy, etc. (psychopathy). We believe that due to the dark nature of the Dark Triad, observed correlations between Short D3 scores and ethical judgments raise important questions about the relationship between moral judgments and personality.

2. Experiment

2.1. Subjects

Participants were 90 males, 69 females, and 1 transgendered individual (“identified male”). Mean age was 31. Subjects were recruited by Mechanical Turk and by web advertisements linked to the Yale Experiment Month website (whereupon clicking a further link,

volunteers were randomly enrolled in any one of several dozen different experiments). IRB approval was obtained for research on human subjects, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all relevant laws and other institutional guidelines were followed.

2.2. Design, Materials, and Procedure

Participants were presented with four surveys: the 27-item “Short D3” Dark Triad survey (Paulhus and Williams 2002), the BFI-44 Big Five Personality inventory, a 17-item Moral Intuition Survey (MIS), and finally, an 11-item demographic survey (see Appendix for all three surveys), all in a randomly selected order (see Appendix for complete copies of all three surveys). Individual items on all surveys was also presented to participants in a randomly selected order, so as to control for potential question-ordering effects.

The Short D3 is a 27-question personality inventory which asks respondents to respond to questions on a 1-5 scale (where ‘1’=disagree strongly, ‘3’=neither agree nor disagree, and ‘5’=agree strongly). The MIS is a 17-question survey which asks respondents to assign ethical evaluations to questions on a 1-5 scale (where ‘1’=morally wrong, ‘3’=morally neutral, and ‘5’=morally required). Responses to each MSI item were then identified as either “conservative” or “liberal,” in line with traditional public divides on each issue. Higher scores (i.e. ‘4’ or ‘5’) on MIS items 1-3, 6, and 9-12, were identified as “liberal judgments”, and lower mean scores (i.e. ‘1’ and ‘2’) on these same items were identified as “conservative judgments.” Conversely, higher scores on survey items 4-5, 7-8, and 14 were identified as “conservative judgments”, and lower scores as “liberal judgments.” Although we recognize that there are many different “types” of conservatism and liberalism – for example, “social conservatism”, “economic conservatism”, etc. – we abstract away from these differences for ease of classification. Finally, we did not identify

responses to items 13 and 15-17 as liberal or conservative, as in our judgment there are no “traditional” liberal or conservative answers to these items.

2.3. Hypotheses

We based our hypotheses on a couple of popular stereotypes about liberals and conservatives (we did not assume any truth behind these stereotypes; we merely wished to test them). Our first hypothesis was based on the common stereotype that conservatives are “hard-hearted”, callous, and self-concerned (a stereotype that is often identified in political discourse with conservatives’ focus on free markets, antipathy toward social programs for the poor [e.g. Welfare], and perceived nationalism with respect to war, terrorism, etc.). Due to this stereotype, our first hypothesis (H1) was that there would be many significant positive correlations between conservative moral judgments and Short D3 constructs. Our second hypothesis was based on the common stereotype that liberals are unusually *altruistic* (a stereotype sometimes said to be reinforced by liberals’ support of social programs for the poor [e.g. Welfare], affirmative action, rights for gays/lesbians/transgendered individuals, etc.). Due to this stereotype, our second hypothesis (H2) was that there would be no significant positive correlations between liberal response-types and Short D3 constructs.

3. Results

3.1. Results for Hypothesized Categorizations

Our experiment confirmed nearly our entire scheme of classifying MIS responses (as “economically conservative”, “economically liberal”, etc.). The only anomaly was MIS Item#5 (“The government ought to detain suspected terrorists as long as necessary

without trial to prevent terrorist attacks”), which failed to significantly correlate with either the “socially conservative” or “socially liberal” response type. See Tables I-IV.

TABLE I. Correlations Between Self-Identified “Economically Conservative” Orientation and MIS Survey Items on Economics-Related MIS Survey Items

MIS Survey Item	Economic Orientation “Conservative” “I consider myself to be a: [select from scale 1-7, where 1=fiscal/economic conservative, 4=fiscal/economic moderate, 7=fiscal/economic liberal”
Item#1: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to ensure that all citizens enjoy <i>basic life necessities</i> ...”	$r = -.590^{**}$ $p = <.00001$
Item#2: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to provide <i>financial aid</i> (i.e. “welfare”) to the poor...”	$r = -.532^{**}$ $p = <.00001$
Item#3: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to bring about a <i>more equal</i> or “ <i>fair</i> ” <i>distribution of wealth</i> .”	$r = -.638^{**}$ $p = <.00001$
Item#8: Government <u>ought</u> to <u>never</u> intervene in free economic markets except ... <i>force (theft, murder) or fraud</i> .”	$r = .366^{**}$ $p = <.00001$
Item#11: “Affirmative Action is: “	$r = -.202^{**}$ $p = <.00001$

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE II. Correlations Between Self-Identified “Economically Liberal” Orientation and MIS Survey Items on Economics-Related MIS Survey Items

MIS Survey Item	Economic Orientation “Liberal” “I consider myself to be a: [select from scale 1-7, where 1=fiscal/economic conservative, 4=fiscal/economic moderate, 7=fiscal/economic liberal”
Item#1: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to ensure that all citizens enjoy <i>basic life necessities</i> ...”	$r = .590^{**}$ $p = <.00001$
Item#2: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to provide <i>financial aid</i> (i.e. “welfare”) to the poor...”	$r = .532^{**}$ $p = <.00001$
Item#3: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to bring about a <i>more equal</i> or “ <i>fair</i> ” <i>distribution of wealth</i> .”	$r = .638^{**}$ $p = <.00001$
Item#8: Government <u>ought</u> to <u>never</u> intervene in free economic markets except ... <i>force (theft, murder) or fraud</i> .”	$r = -.366^{**}$ $p = <.00001$
Item#11: “Affirmative Action is: “	$r = .202^{**}$, $p = <.00001$

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE III. Correlations Between Self-Identified “Socially Conservative” Orientation and MIS Survey Items on Economics-Related MIS Survey Items

MIS Survey Item	Social Orientation “Conservative” “I consider myself to be a: [select from scale 1-7, where 1=social conservative, 4=social moderate, 7= social liberal”
Item#4: “A government <u>ought</u> to restrict citizens’ liberties somewhat in order to protect them from terrorist attacks.”	$r = .207^{**}$ $p = <.009$
Item#5: “A government <u>ought</u> to detain suspected terrorists as long as necessary without trial to prevent terrorist attacks.”	$r = .084$ $p = .292$
Item#7: “The government has the <u>right</u> to wage war on enemy states <i>even if doing so violates UN resolutions.</i> ”	$r = .172^*$ $p = .029$
Item#9: “Homosexual behavior is: “	$r = -.476^{**}, p = <.00001$
Item#10: “Gay marriage is: “	$r = -.459^{**}, p = <.00001$
Item#12: “Gun control is: “	$r = -.246^{**}, p = .002$
Item#14: “The death penalty for persons convicted of premeditated murder is: “	$r = -.318^{**}, p = <.00001$

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE IV. Correlations Between Self-Identified “Socially Liberal” Orientation and MIS Survey Items on Economics-Related MIS Survey Items

MIS Survey Item	Social Orientation “Liberal” “I consider myself to be a: [select from scale 1-7, where 1=social conservative, 4=social moderate, 7=social liberal”
Item#4: “A government <u>ought</u> to restrict citizens’ liberties somewhat in order to protect them from terrorist attacks.”	$r = .207^{**}$ $p = <.009$
Item#5: “A government <u>ought</u> to detain suspected terrorists as long as necessary without trial to prevent terrorist attacks.”	$r = -.084$ $p = .292$
Item#7: “The government has the <u>right</u> to wage war on enemy states <i>even if doing so violates UN resolutions.</i> ”	$r = -.172^*$ $p = .029$
Item#9: “Homosexual behavior is: “	$r = .476^{**}, p = <.00001$
Item#10: “Gay marriage is: “	$r = .459^{**}, p = <.00001$
Item#12: “Gun control is: “	$r = .246^{**}, p = .002$
Item#14: “The death penalty for persons convicted of premeditated murder is: “	$r = .318^{**}, p = <.00001$

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

3.2. Results for Economic Moral Judgments

We found four statistically significant positive correlations, and no significant negative correlations, between “economically conservative” MIS responses and Short D3 constructs. Machiavellianism had a significant positive correlation with conservative opposition to MIS item #2 (“A government ought to tax its citizens in order to provide financial aid (i.e. welfare) to the poor”) [$r = .164, p = .040$] and MIS item #3 (“A government ought to tax its citizens in order to bring about a more equal or “fair” distribution of wealth”) [$r = .165, p = .037$], and with conservative approval for MIS item #8 (“A government ought to never intervene in free markets...”) [$r = .204, p = .010$]. Table V displays these results. Conversely, we found four significant negative correlations, and no significant positive correlations, between “economically liberal” responses and Short D3 constructs (Table VI).

Table V. Short D3 Correlations for “Economically Conservative” Responses

Dark Triad Constructs MIS Items	MACHIAVELLIANISM	NARCISSISM	PSYCHOPATHY
Item#1: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to ensure that all citizens enjoy <i>basic life necessities...</i> ”	$r = .084, p = .290$	$r = .053, p = .505$	$r = .150, p = .058$
Item#2: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to provide <i>financial aid</i> (i.e. “welfare”) to the poor...”	$r = .164^*, p = .040$	$r = .069, p = .382$	$r = .118, p = .137$
Item#3: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to bring about a <i>more equal or “fair” distribution of wealth.</i> ”	$r = .165^*, p = .037$	$r = -.047, p = .552$	$r = .099, p = .211$
Item#8: Government ought to <u>never</u> intervene in free economic markets except to prevent or punish <i>force (theft, murder) or fraud.</i> ”	$r = .204^*, p = .010$	$r = .036, p = .650$	$r = .171^*, p = .031$
Item#11: “Affirmative Action is: “	$r = .109, p = .167$	$r = .062, p = .435$	$r = .081, p = .308$

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Table VI. Short D3 Correlations for “Economically Liberal” Responses

Dark Triad Constructs	MACHIAVELLIANISM	NARCISSISM	PSYCHOPATHY
MIS Items			
Item#1: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to ensure that all citizens enjoy <i>basic life necessities...</i> ”	$r = -.084, p = .290$	$r = -.053, p = .505$	$r = -.150, p = .058$
Item#2: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to provide <i>financial aid</i> (i.e. “welfare”) to the poor...”	$r = -.164^*, p = .040$	$r = -.069, p = .382$	$r = -.118, p = .137$
Item#3: “A government <u>ought</u> to tax its citizens in order to bring about a <i>more equal or “fair” distribution of wealth.</i> ”	$r = -.165^*, p = .037$	$r = .047, p = .552$	$r = -.099, p = .211$
Item#8: Government ought to <u>never</u> intervene in free economic markets except to prevent or punish <i>force (theft, murder) or fraud.</i> ”	$r = -.204^*, p = .010$	$r = -.036, p = .650$	$r = -.171^*, p = .031$
Item#11: “Affirmative Action is: “	$r = -.109, p = .167$	$r = -.062, p = .435$	$r = -.081, p = .308$

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

3.3. Results for Social Moral Judgments

We found four significant positive correlations, and one significant negative correlation, between “socially conservative” MIS responses and Short D3 constructs (see Table IX); and conversely, four significant negative correlations, and one significant positive correlation, between “socially liberal” MIS responses and Short D3 constructs (Table X). Social conservative approval of MIS item#7 (“The government has the right to wage war...even if doing so violates UN resolutions”) correlated significantly with both narcissism ($r = .241, p = .002$) and psychopathy ($r = .201, p = .010$). Social conservative approval of MIS item#14 (“The death penalty for persons convicted of premeditated murder is: “) correlated very strongly with Machiavellianism ($r = .336, p = <.0001$) and psychopathy ($r = .233, p = .003$). In contrast, the only significant positive correlation between Short D3 constructs and

liberal responses occurred in the case of liberal opposition to MIS item#4 (“A government ought to restrict citizens’ liberties somewhat to protect them from terrorist attacks”), which correlated positively with psychopathy ($r = .171, p = .029$). See Tables VII-VIII.

Table VII. Short D3 Correlations for “Socially Conservative” Responses

Dark Triad Construct	MACHIAVELLIANISM	NARCISSISM	PSYCHOPATHY
MIS Item			
Item#4: “A government <u>ought</u> to restrict citizens’ liberties somewhat in order to protect them from terrorist attacks.”	$r = -.054, p = .492$	$r = -.035, p = .660$	$r = -.171^*, p = .029$
Item#6: “The government has a <u>duty</u> to conform to United Nations resolutions.”	$r = .001, p = .994$	$r = .121, p = .125$	$r = .094, p = .232$
Item#7: “The government has the <u>right</u> to wage war on enemy states <i>even if doing so violates UN resolutions.</i> ”	$r = .154, p = .051$	$r = .241^{**}, p = .002$	$r = .201^*, p = .010$
Item#9: “Homosexual behavior is: “	$r = .009, p = .905$	$r = .013, p = .868$	$r = .010, p = .904$
Item#10: “Gay marriage is: “	$r = -.017, p = .830$	$r = -.071, p = .370$	$r = .041, p = .606$
Item#12: “Gun control is: “	$r = -.052, p = .510$	$r = .085, p = .285$	$r = .024, p = .763$
Item#14: “The death penalty for persons convicted of premeditated murder is: “	$r = .336^{**}, p = <.0001$	$r = .146, p = .064$	$r = .233^{**}, p = .003$

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Table VIII. Short D3 Correlations for “Socially Liberal” Responses

Dark Triad Construct	MACHIAVELLIANISM	NARCISSISM	PSYCHOPATHY
MIS Item			
Item#4: “A government <u>ought</u> to restrict citizens’ liberties somewhat in order to protect them from terrorist attacks.”	$r = .054, p = .492$	$r = .035, p = .660$	$r = .171^*, p = .029$
Item#6: “The government has a <u>duty</u> to conform to United Nations resolutions.”	$r = -.001, p = .994$	$r = -.121, p = .125$	$r = -.094, p = .232$
Item#7: “The government has the <u>right</u> to wage war on enemy states <i>even if doing so violates UN resolutions.</i> ”	$r = -.154, p = .051$	$r = -.241^{**}, p = .002$	$r = -.201^*, p = .010$
Item#9: “Homosexual behavior is: “	$r = -.009, p = .905$	$r = -.013, p = .868$	$r = -.010, p = .904$
Item#10: “Gay marriage is: “	$r = .017, p = .830$	$r = .071, p = .370$	$r = -.041, p = .606$
Item#12: “Gun control is: “	$r = .052, p = .510$	$r = -.085, p = .285$	$r = -.024, p = .763$
Item#14: “The death penalty for persons convicted of premeditated murder is: “	$r = -.336^{**}, p = <.0001$	$r = .146, p = .064$	$r = -.233^{**}, p = .003$

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

4. Discussion

Our results moderately confirmed our two hypotheses, (H1) and (H2). Although we only tested twelve partisan moral issues, 5 out of 12 conservative response-types (or 41.6%) had at least one significant positive correlation with Short D3 constructs, and 3 out of 12 (or 25%) of conservative response-types having a significant positive correlation with *two* Short D3 constructs. Thus, our results mildly confirmed (H1), the hypothesis that there would be multiple significant correlations between conservative moral judgments and Short D3 constructs. Insofar as only one of 12 liberal response-types correlated significantly with Short D3 constructs, our data came very close to confirming (H2), the hypothesis that there would be *no* significant positive correlations between liberal

judgments and Short D3 constructs. Our results, as such, have very provocative implications. They suggest that conservatives may, on average, have somewhat “darker” personality profiles than liberals. If so, is this a strike against “conservative values”? Is there some real truth to the common stereotype that conservative values are “hard-hearted”? Further research is needed to answer these questions more definitively.

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