Students’ “Dark Side”
Personalities in a Classroom Setting

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This chapter includes an exploration of the dark side, and what it means to educators in the context of students in a learning environment. An in-depth description of the dark side is provided to assist educators in understanding the dark personality traits that students might present in a classroom setting. The chapter covers offensive and yet nonpathological personalities that students may present, including Machiavellianism, subclinical narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy, referred to as the Dark Triad. All three personalities share features of varying degrees of self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity, and aggressiveness. Everyday sadism is another dark personality described in this chapter. Consulting the literature on dark personalities, this chapter provides an educator with

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When dark side behaviors are acted out in a classroom setting, other students are affected, and negative consequences result. Educators would benefit from having a better understanding on how to deal with these situations.

In this chapter, dark side behaviors (compulsiveness, passive-aggression, narcissism) and other dark side personality traits will be explored and discussed in the context of students and educators in a learning environment. These behaviors manifest themselves in both group and individual levels, and these traits can influence how students respond or react in a classroom situation. This chapter includes further discussion on ways educators can respond to and handle situations that arise in the classroom, and the role of creating a safe place for students to confront their dark sides and allow for learning and growth.

Overview

This being human is a guest house. / Every morning a new arrival. / A joy, a depression, a meanness, / some momentary awareness comes / as an unexpected visitor. / Welcome and entertain them all! / Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, / who violently sweep your house / empty of its furniture, / still treat each guest honorably. / He may be clearing you out / for some new delight. / The dark thought, the shame, the malice, / meet them at the door laughing, / and invite them in. / Be grateful for whoever comes, / because each has been sent / as a guide from beyond. ("The Guest House" by Mewlana Jalaluddin Rumi)

When students come into a learning environment, they bring their individual personalities and behaviors that an educator honors and interacts with during the learning process. Students may have dysfunctional interpersonal dispositions such as dark side personality traits, which are socially undesirable attributes and that have been shown to predict career derailment across a variety of organizations, levels, and positions (Dalal & Nolan, 2009). In their research, Hogan and Hogan (2001) suggested that the dark side personality traits do coexist with functional interpersonal dispositions, including talent, ambition, and good social skills. When students present with dark side behaviors in the form of compulsiveness, passive-aggression, narcissism, and other personality issues, educators benefit from understanding the dark characteristics. Bohart (2013) reported that Freud, Rollo May, and others believed that individuals must consciously confront their dark sides to grow.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) suggested that creating positive classroom climates supports student learning. The students that present behaviors stemming from personality disorders can be supported by educators who understand the manifestations of the particular disorders. Mgbodile (1997) contended that the school environment should allow students to increase their feelings of satisfaction, belonging, identification, and achievement in present and future situations.

Review of the Literature

Several researchers believe that everyone has a shadow personality. Zweig and Abrams (1991) reported that every child naturally develops a personal shadow. Parents, siblings, teachers, clergy, and friends create a complex environment in which one learns what is kind, proper, moral behavior, and what is mean-spirited, shameful, and sinful. Zweig and Abrams (1991) also reported that the shadow will act like a psychic immune system, which defines what is self and what is not self. What falls into ego and what falls into shadow can vary depending on family and environmental factors. Zweig and Abrams (1991) stated “All the feelings and capacities that are rejected by the ego and exiled into the shadow contribute to the hidden power of the dark side of human nature” (p. XVII). The authors suggested that the personal shadow contains undeveloped, unexpressed potential. This personal shadow is the part of the unconscious that is complementary to the ego and represents those characteristics that the conscious personality does not wish to acknowledge. Instead, the conscious personality neglects, forgets, and hides these characteristics, only to have them surface in uncomfortable confrontations with others.

The study of dark personality and its impact is not new. Harms and Spain (2015) cited Kraepelin and Diefendorf’s (1907) work, and indicated that the study of dark side personality began when Kraepelin detailed the nature of disturbed personalities. Kraepelin and Diefendorf (1907)
described disturbed personalities as: (a) the morally insane, characterized by a lack of comprehensive reflection and foresight; (b) the unstable, characterized by becoming rapidly interested and disinterested in activities, moodiness, and irritability; (c) the morbid liar and swindler, characterized by high intelligence, deriving joy from successfully deceiving others, and prone to blaming others for setbacks; and (d) the pseudo-querulants, characterized by suspiciousness, defensiveness, and litigiousness. Harm and Spain (2015) summarized these personalities as modern labels of psychopathic, borderline personality, Machiavellianism, and paranoia.

Similarly, Paulhus and Williams (2002) came up with the term Dark Triads, a constellation of three related, socially undesirable personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy. In the recent years, a fourth trait, everyday sadism, was added to the roster. Ashby and Linda (2005) described compulsiveness as pathological since it involves extreme preoccupation with thoughts or activities, and also that it includes a tendency toward over-organization and difficulty making decisions. Paulhus (2014) referred to these dark personalities as a set of socially aversive traits in the subclinical range and considers these socially offensive traits falling in the normal or everyday range.

The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) described narcissism disorder as:

- a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, which include the following: (a) a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements); (b) preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; (c) belief that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions); (d) requirement of excessive admiration; (e) having a sense of entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations); (f) being interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends); (g) lacking empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others; (h) being often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her; (i) shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes. (p. 669)

Further noted in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) is that vulnerability in self-esteem makes individuals with narcissistic personality disorder sensitive to injury from criticism or defeat. Although they may not show it outwardly, criticism may haunt these individuals and may leave them feeling humiliated, degraded, hollow, and empty. When narcissists feel this way, they may react with disdain, rage, or defiant counterattack (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Muris, Meesters, and Timmermans (2013) defined Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy in the following ways: Machiavellianism is the manipulation and exploitation of others, a cynical disregard of morality, and a focus on self-interest. Narcissism is concerned with a grandiose self-view, a sense of entitlement, and egotism. Psychopathy mainly has to do with callousness and a lack of personal affect and remorsefulness. Sadism is another trait that can be added to the list. Sadism involves the humiliation of others, patterns of cruelty and meaning behavior, and harming others physically, sexually, or psychologically for personal enjoyment (Southard, Noser, Pollock, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, 2015).

In recent studies by Jones and Paulhus (2011), the personality traits described are related to the Big Five personality factors, which include extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. Muris et al. (2013) reported that Machiavellianism is positively correlated to neuroticism and negatively correlated with agreeableness and conscientiousness. Narcissism is positively correlated to extraversion and negatively correlated to agreeableness. Psychopathy is negatively correlated to both agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Researchers studying different personality traits have revealed that the Dark Triad traits have a significant negative impact on functioning in daily life (Muris et al., 2013). These authors believed individuals with high degrees of Dark Triad traits

- adopt more aggressive and forceful tactics at work;
- display more risky and less self-controlling behaviors;
- more often use aggressive and self-defeating humor styles;
- more frequently engage in bullying behaviors;
show a stronger tendency toward short-term, exploratory mating and superficial intimate relationships; and
• exhibit higher levels of prejudice and racism.

These more aggressive, forceful tactics can also be demonstrated in a classroom environment, as evidenced by research that shows that threatened egotism among students with high self-esteem is associated with more aggression, especially when coupled with high narcissism (Vaillancourt, 2013). The Big Five personality traits provide a framework to understand individual differences and social relationships from the internalized and externalized symptoms that may be displayed by individuals, including students.

Integration into the Student Experience

Students do not often display their personalities when they first come into a learning environment. Through the process of learning and the challenges that arise, educators may have a glimpse of some positive or negative behaviors exhibited by students. Research studies have indicated that the transition to college by students normally coincides with a period of development. Characteristics of this developmental period include instability, identity exploration, reduced parental monitoring, and a general lack of commitment to the familial and financial responsibilities and roles of adulthood (Nelson & Barry, 2005).

Educators can contextualize these characteristics within the Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) and sadism. Some students may present personality traits and socially deviant behaviors, including “a glib and superficial charm; egocentricity; selfishness; lack of empathy, guilt, and remorse; deceitfulness; lack of enduring attachments to people, principles, or goals; impulsive and irresponsible behavior; and a tendency to violate explicit norms” (Hare & Hart, 1993, p. 34). Rivers, Brackett, Omori, Sickler, Bertoli, and Salovey (2013) reported that, in general, a variety of maladaptive behaviors tend to occur as a result of decisions made under less than optimal conditions.

Students may present with maladaptive behaviors in a classroom, but educators should be cautious not to assume the behaviors are always negative. A student, for example, who has a high need for achievement and high levels of competitiveness could be narcissistic and exhibit a need for admiration and a lack of empathy. An educator should be aware of these behavior patterns in the student and focus on the positive aspects of these tendencies. Studies have shown that individuals who exhibit these narcissistic behaviors manage to survive, and even flourish, in everyday society. Zibarras, Port, and Woods (2008) reported the importance of encouraging such students to be innovative and creative, which means having self-confidence, high energy, independence of judgment, autonomy, and toleration.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

By defining the dark side and recognizing what fuels the behaviors, educators can help students feel in control in a learning environment. Muris et al. (2013) showed that individuals with high levels of Dark Triad traits may demonstrate aggressive, forceful tactics; be bullish toward other students or the educator in the classroom; or express racial slurs or prejudice. Narcissism is demonstrated when the student is highly reactive to criticism, has low self-esteem, can be inordinately self-righteous and defensive, reacts to contrary viewpoints with anger or rage, projects negative qualities onto others, and demonstrates poor interpersonal boundaries. Such a student may challenge an educator on minor matters in class, all with the intention of undermining the educator’s character and the qualification to teach, in front of other students.

It is important for an educator to understand that personalities of students are not necessarily constant across each person, since there are individual differences that distinguish them. Students may behave differently in different courses, and with different professors. The dark side personality tendencies might be different in some situations; for instance, perfectionistic students will most often be frustrated and disappointed with both themselves and other people who fail to meet their unrealistic expectations. Jones and Paulhus (2011) concluded that, in this case, such a student would be demonstrating impulsivity, and that both narcissistic and psychopathic individuals tend to show higher levels of overall impulsivity.

Each characteristic of the Dark Triad is correlated with different forms of impulsivity, and Dickman (1990) differentiated between functional impulsivity and dysfunctional impulsivity. He described functional impulsivity as being related to idea generation, enthusiasm, adventurousness, and the ability to make quick decisions. On the other hand, dysfunctional
impulsivity is related to erratic disorderliness, distraction, and inaccurate decision making (Dickman, 1990). A student can present with enthusiasm in class, but can also be erratic and disorderly, which can distract others.

**Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations**

Students learn best in an environment in which they feel a sense of trust, safety, and openness to different modes of learning, acceptance, and a basic sense of security. They also bring their personalities and egos. The students bring their light sides and dark sides, which educators interact with on a daily basis. The light side can be well tolerated by the educators and the other students in the classroom, whereas the students who act out their dark side personalities might create discomfort for other students, and even challenge and undermine the educator. Jones and Paulhus (2011) reported that the Dark Triad members have unique personality styles favoring different life outcomes. Each member is believed to have a unique social engagement style that might prove adaptive in some situations but maladaptive in others.

The concept of the shadow, as a portion of everyone’s personality, and how it manifests in our personal lives through the unconscious as it spills into our self-defeating behaviors are important for educators to understand. Students enter the learning environment with baggage from their childhood, where they may have been blocked, oppressed, and denied permission for expressing themselves, thus they might struggle in an overcompensated way to break free from the strong grip of their family experiences by hiding in their shadow, or the dark side.

**Conclusion**

The dark side behaviors, which may include compulsiveness, passive-aggression, narcissism, and other dark personality traits, were examined through exploration of the Dark Triad. The research discussed in this chapter reveals that educators must acknowledge and be aware that students in general have a dark side of their personalities. However, not all students will display dark side behaviors in the classroom unless triggered by specific circumstances.

Educators need to create a learning environment in which students feel safe, accepted, and respected and to understand students without stereotyping them as having darker personalities. This chapter shows an educator’s understanding of the dark side that students bring into the classroom, and can improve their understanding of many propositions around narcissism, Machiavellianism, subclinical psychopathy, of which some of the dark side behaviors students may exhibit in the form of compulsiveness, passive-aggression, and narcissistic tendencies.

**References**


**Author Biography**

Joyce T. Mphande-Finn is an Associate Professor and Associate Program Director in the Master of Arts in Counseling at City University of Seattle. She spent 15 years practicing as a clinical mental health counselor in Montana and Oregon. She has been teaching in higher education for seven years. She holds a BA in education from the University of Malawi, a BS in business administration from Berea College, an MA in mental health counseling from the University of Montana, and an EdD in counselor education and supervision from the University of Montana.