

The Relationship Between Dark Personality Traits and Moral Hypocrisy: The Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement

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Purpose: The current study investigated the relationship between dark personality traits, moral hypocrisy, and moral disengagement in accordance with life history theory and social cognitive theory.

Methods: Two types of moral hypocrisy were examined using questionnaires with moral scenarios and behavioral experiments: interpersonal moral hypocrisy (ie, moral double standards) and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy (ie, misalignment between words and deeds). A sample of 638 students (384 females, 60.19%) aged 18 to 25 years ($M_{age} = 22.53$, $SD_{age} = 1.81$) was recruited at a Chinese university using a convenience sampling method.

Results: Results showed that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were positively associated with moral hypocrisy. In addition, moral disengagement partially mediated the relationship between Machiavellianism and moral hypocrisy, partially mediated the relationship between narcissism and moral hypocrisy, and fully mediated the relationship between psychopathy and moral hypocrisy.

Conclusion: These findings advanced the understanding of the relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy and shed light on how to prevent moral hypocrisy.

Keywords: moral hypocrisy, Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, moral disengagement

Introduction

In daily life, we encounter many individuals who claim to follow or even encourage others to follow moral norms in public, while in private, they not only do not follow but even violate moral norms themselves. This inconsistency between words and actions is called moral hypocrisy at the intrapersonal level.¹ Additionally, there is another form of moral hypocrisy. People may harshly criticize the unethical behavior of others on the Internet anonymously, yet show leniency towards themselves when facing the same situation. This phenomenon of moral double standards is a form of moral hypocrisy at the interpersonal level.² Combining these two forms, moral hypocrisy refers to individuals' actual behavior failing to meet their claimed moral requirements of behavior;^{1,3} individuals are stricter in judging other people's moral transgressions than in judging their own.² Batson (2008) argues that the essence of moral hypocrisy is pursuing self-interest while maintaining a positive moral image.⁴ Many studies have found that moral hypocrisy is common.^{1,5-8} For example, Lin et al (2021) concluded that approximately half of the participants engaged in moral hypocrisy.⁶ Moral hypocrisy not only damages an individual's reputation and undermines trust in interpersonal relationships but also invites moral condemnation from others,^{5,9,10} exacerbates interpersonal conflicts between groups, and worsens the online environment.¹¹ Therefore, it is important to examine the personal and psychological variables that cause moral hypocrisy.

Dark Personality Traits and Moral Hypocrisy

The Dark Triad of personality refers to a combination of three personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy.¹² These three personality traits share common characteristics, such as low empathy, dishonesty, callousness,

and selfishness.^{13–15} These characteristics predicted a fast life history strategy.¹⁶ Previous research has found that individuals with high scores on dark personality traits tend to adopt a fast life history strategy.^{17,18} According to life history theory, individuals adopting a fast life history strategy often place their own interest needs above those of others in interpersonal interactions.^{19,20} Notably, moral hypocrisy is a behavior driven by self-interest.⁴ Bonfa-Araujo et al (2023) found that individuals scoring high in dark personality traits prioritize public recognition; they tend to engage in charitable donations only when there is an opportunity to gain reputations.²¹ This suggests that their involvement in donations is not motivated by genuine altruism. Previous research has found that individuals with high scores of dark personality traits often say one thing and do another,²² potentially displaying high levels of intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. Individuals scoring high on dark personality traits tend to struggle with empathizing with others,²³ are strictly critical of others, and may exhibit high levels of interpersonal moral hypocrisy.

In addition to the commonality, each trait of the Dark Triad of personality has its own uniqueness. Individuals with higher Machiavellianism scores are characterized by the willingness to manipulate others.²⁴ Jones et al (2017) found through 5 behavioral studies of dishonesty that those high in Machiavellianism exhibited interpersonal deception and duplicity.¹⁴ The lack of moral sense leads them to manipulate others by lying^{15,25,26} to shape their self-image in pursuit of status and power.¹⁵ For self-interest, they manipulate and exploit others and may impose higher moral demands on others, thus portraying themselves as having a morally virtuous image.^{27,28} These findings suggest that Machiavellianism may be positively associated with interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. Individuals scoring high in psychopathy exhibit impulsivity and poor self-control.²⁹ The reduction of self-control resources increased intrapersonal and interpersonal moral hypocrisy.¹ The main characteristics of narcissism are self-centeredness, superiority, entitlement, and desire for attention.^{12,30} Studies have shown that empathy and interpersonal relationships are the driving force that triggers ethical behavior.³¹ Due to the lack of empathy and intimate interpersonal relationships, narcissists are less likely to engage in moral behavior.³² Even if they exhibit moral behavior, their motives are not moral. Fossati et al (2010) found that narcissistic individuals presented seemingly moral behavior only for impression management (eg, to obtain good moral impressions and higher moral evaluations) and to achieve a sense of superiority.³³ These findings suggest that psychopathy and narcissism may have an impact on intrapersonal and interpersonal moral hypocrisy.

Moral Disengagement as a Mediator

According to Bandura's theory of social cognition, moral disengagement refers to an individual developing some specific cognitive tendencies and using these cognitive tendencies to adjust the internal attribution of responsibility, so as to minimize their own responsibility for the consequences of their actions.³⁴ Bandura noted that moral disengagement can disrupt moral self-regulation through cognitive mechanisms, leading to moral hypocrisy.³⁵ Through three experiments, Batson found that a moral disengagement mechanism that distorts behavioral outcomes can induce moral hypocrisy.³⁶ Yu and Zhang (2024) found that moral disengagement negatively predicts both intrapersonal and interpersonal moral hypocrisy.³⁷ Regarding the relationship between personality and moral disengagement, studies have shown that moral disengagement is associated with dark personality traits.³⁸ For example, Shulman et al (2011) found that psychopaths do not feel emotions such as shame and guilt after engaging in antisocial behavior due to their high level of moral disengagement.³⁹ Narcissistic individuals tend to shirk their responsibilities, attributing their successes to themselves while blaming others for any negative outcomes.^{40,41} Egan et al (2015) found that Machiavellianism and psychopathy positively predicted moral disengagement.⁴² Individuals who score high on Machiavellianism and psychopathy often justify their actions that violate moral standards in order to secure personal benefits.¹² Therefore, moral disengagement, as a cognitive mediator,^{43,44} may mediate the effects of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism on moral hypocrisy.

Overview of the Present Study

The current study aims to explore the relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy (both interpersonal and intrapersonal), as well as the mediating role of moral disengagement in this relationship (Figure 1). Based on the existing literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

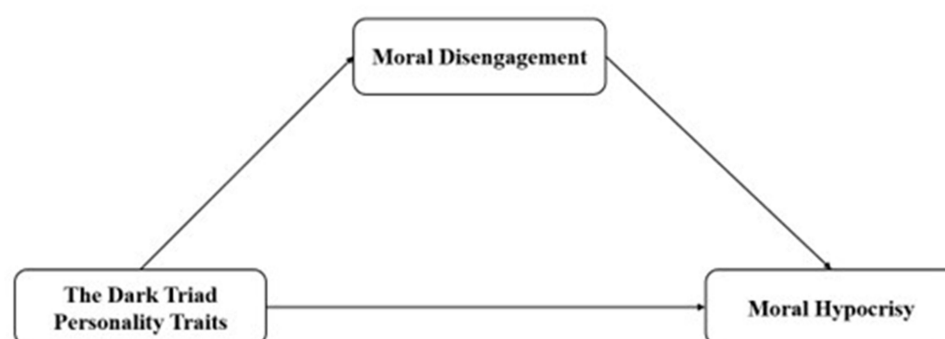


Figure 1 The hypothesized model.

Hypothesis 1: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy are positively associated with moral hypocrisy at both the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels.

Hypothesis 2: Moral disengagement mediates the association between dark personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) and moral hypocrisy.

There are three major contributions of the current study: (a) First, most studies have explored only one manifestation of moral hypocrisy. Since moral hypocrisy contains both intra- and interpersonal forms, this study, for the first time, investigates the impact of dark personality traits on moral hypocrisy from two forms of hypocrisy, using a combination of behavioral choice measures and questionnaires. (b) Second, although existing research has found evidence that narcissism is related to moral hypocrisy,⁴⁵ the relationships between the other two dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy have not been directly tested. This study not only includes the two dark personality traits other than narcissism, but also explores, for the first time, the potential psychological mechanisms underlying the relationships between these three dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. (c) Third, how the Dark Triad personality traits affect moral hypocrisy remains unclear. According to social cognitive theory, moral disengagement is a cognitive factor that induces moral hypocrisy.³⁵ Studies have found that self-monitoring personality influences individuals' unethical behavior through moral disengagement.⁴⁶ Therefore, moral disengagement may serve as a mediator in the relationship between personality traits and moral hypocrisy. This study not only implies potential mechanisms that prompt moral hypocrisy but also provides insights into interventions aimed at reducing moral hypocrisy.

Methods

Participants

Using a convenience sampling method, a total of 650 university students were recruited to participate in a laboratory study. Twelve students were excluded from the final sample for not correctly answering the attention-check items (eg, "Please choose #1 on this question"). Therefore, the study included data from 638 students. Among them, there were 61 freshmen, 162 sophomores, 198 juniors, and 217 seniors. The sample included 254 male and 384 female students, with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years, and an average age of 22.53 years ($SD = 1.81$). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study. This investigation was approved by the ethics committee of the first author's institution. Each participant received 10 RMB upon completing the study.

Measures

The Dark Triad

The Dirty Dozen Scale was developed by Jonason et al (2010).¹⁶ The Chinese version of the Dirty Dozen, revised by Huang et al (2019), was used to assess individuals' dark personality traits.⁴⁷ This 12-item scale contains three personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. It is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to

5 = “strongly agree”. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism were 0.89, 0.75, and 0.79, respectively.

Moral Disengagement

The Moral Disengagement Scale, originally developed by Bandura et al (1996), was adapted into a Chinese version by Wang et al (2010), consisting of 26 items with robust reliability and validity.^{35,48} Participants rated each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.85.

Interpersonal Moral Hypocrisy

Interpersonal moral hypocrisy was measured using the Moral Situational Assessment Paradigm.² Participants evaluated four moral scenarios. For example: “A person is driving to attend an important meeting. Due to the light traffic on the road and considering that he might be late, he decides to exceed the speed limit to arrive at the meeting on time”. Participants rated the acceptability of each behavior for themselves and for another unspecified person on a scale from 1 (not at all acceptable) to 7 (completely acceptable). Moral hypocrisy is indicated when participants rate their own actions as more acceptable than those of others. The difference between self-evaluation and other-evaluation scores signifies the level of interpersonal moral hypocrisy, with greater discrepancies indicating higher hypocrisy.⁴⁹ In this study, scenarios were presented in random order. To mitigate the sequential effects of self-judgment and other-judgment, half the participants made self-judgments first, while the other half made other-judgments first, with an unrelated moral judgment task in between to obscure the study’s purpose. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were 0.90 for self-ratings and 0.87 for other-ratings.

Intrapersonal Moral Hypocrisy

The “task assignment” paradigm is a widely used method to measure intrapersonal moral hypocrisy,⁴ adapted for Chinese samples by Tong and Yang (2011).⁵⁰ It involves two types of tasks: a fun task with a reward and a boring task with no reward. Participants act as distributors and can choose to flip a coin to determine task assignments. Moral hypocrisy is observed if they choose to flip a coin but subsequently assign positive tasks to themselves and negative tasks to others, regardless of the coin-flip outcome.^{36,51}

At the outset of the study, participants were instructed to assign tasks to themselves and another “participant” in a separate room, either as a distributor or a receiver. Tasks labeled in green were described as straightforward and enjoyable, with minor rewards upon completion. Conversely, tasks marked in red were portrayed as intricate and tedious, offering no incentives. Following a computer-generated randomization of roles, all participants received a screen notification stating, “You are now the task distributor.” Distributors had three distribution options: (1) to flip a coin, (2) to not flip a coin, assign green tasks to themselves, and assign red tasks to others, or (3) to not flip a coin, assign red tasks to themselves, and assign green tasks to others. They were instructed that “whatever choice you make, the recipient must accept it unconditionally and be informed that the task is randomly assigned and that he/she never knows who you are”. After clarifying the above rules, participants were asked to answer the following questions: “What do you think is the most moral way to assign the tasks?” and “What were your task assignment options?” If participants chose not to flip a coin, the experiment ended. However, those who opted to flip the coin experienced a simulated toss where the outcome was consistently “self-red.” Regardless of this outcome, participants were free to assign either red or green tasks. Moral hypocrites were those who claimed that the most moral assignment was a coin toss and then assigned the green task to themselves after the coin toss.

Social Desirability

The covariate variable Social Desirability was measured using the 12-item Social Desirability Scale to account for participants’ tendency to respond in socially desirable ways.⁵² Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.” In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.80.

Procedure

Participants completed all questionnaires, moral scenarios, and the “task assignment” task using E-prime 2.0 on individual laptops in a private room after giving informed consent. They first filled out all scales, completed the moral situation assessment task, and subsequently undertook the “task assignment” experiment.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were conducted using the SPSS 23.0 version. Using the Mplus 8.0 version as the statistical software, this study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) and bias-corrected nonparametric percentile bootstrap methods for statistical analysis to examine the mediating effect of moral disengagement on dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. Structural equation modeling allows for the simultaneous analysis of multiple independent variables, dependent variables, and mediating variables.⁵³ Since this study involves multiple independent and dependent variables, SEM was employed. Given that intrapersonal moral hypocrisy was coded as a dichotomous variable (0 = not a moral hypocrite, 1 = a moral hypocrite), the weighted least squares mean and variance corrected (WLSMV) estimator was used. Age, gender, and social desirability were used as control variables throughout the analysis. The critical values for small, medium, and large effect sizes correspond to $R^2 = 0.04$, $R^2 = 0.25$, and $R^2 = 0.64$, respectively.⁵⁴

Results

Common Method Bias

Harman’s single-factor test was used in this study to examine common method bias. According to the unrotated factor analysis results, a total of 15 factors with characteristic roots greater than 1 were extracted in this study. The maximum factorial variance explained was 18.01% (less than 40%). Therefore, there was no serious common method bias in this study.

Preliminary Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis were performed on the main variables’ scores (see Table 1). As anticipated, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism showed positive associations with interpersonal moral hypocrisy, intrapersonal moral hypocrisy, and moral disengagement. Additionally, moral disengagement exhibited positive associations with both interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. Since the correlation coefficients between the dark triad personality traits were all less than 0.8, it can be initially concluded that there was no serious multicollinearity issue among them. To further test for multicollinearity, variance inflation factors (VIFs) were

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between Variables

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age	22.53 (1.81)	1								
2 Gender	1.60 (0.49)	−0.18***	1							
3 Social desirability	3.48 (0.75)	−0.05	0.03	1						
4 Machiavellianism	3.02 (0.79)	0.04	0.02	−0.02	1					
5 Psychopathy	2.11 (0.45)	0.07	−0.06	−0.01	0.52***	1				
6 Narcissism	2.62 (0.61)	0.07	−0.01	0.003	0.37***	0.25***	1			
7 MD	2.01 (0.39)	0.10**	−0.03	−0.05	0.44***	0.38***	0.29***	1		
8 Interpersonal MH	0.14 (0.40)	0.001	0.02	−0.02	0.30***	0.24***	0.24***	0.26***	1	
9 Intrapersonal MH	0.53 (0.50)	−0.01	−0.01	−0.002	0.31***	0.24***	0.22***	0.27***	0.60***	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Abbreviation: MD, moral disengagement; MH, moral hypocrisy.

examined.⁵⁵ The results showed that the VIF value for Machiavellianism was 1.50, for narcissism was 1.16, and for psychopathy was 1.38. The maximum VIF value was 1.50, which was far below the critical threshold of 10.^{56–58} This further indicated that there was no multicollinearity issue among the dark triad personality traits in this study.

Testing Mediation Effects

Mplus was used to investigate the mediating effect of moral disengagement in the relationship between personality traits and moral hypocrisy, controlling for gender, age, and social desirability. A total of 5000 samples were randomly extracted, with a default 95% confidence interval. SEM was conducted to examine the relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. The three dark personality traits were specified as predictors of both interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. The results showed that the data fit the model well (saturated model). Path analysis results showed that Machiavellianism significantly predicted interpersonal moral hypocrisy ($B = 0.30, p < 0.001; R^2 = 0.09, p < 0.001$) and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy positively ($B = 0.38, p < 0.001; R^2 = 0.15, p < 0.001$). Psychopathy significantly predicted interpersonal moral hypocrisy ($B = 0.24, p < 0.001; R^2 = 0.06, p < 0.01$) and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy positively ($B = 0.31, p < 0.001; R^2 = 0.09, p < 0.001$). Narcissism significantly predicted interpersonal moral hypocrisy ($B = 0.24, p < 0.001; R^2 = 0.06, p < 0.01$) and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy positively ($B = 0.28, p < 0.001; R^2 = 0.08, p < 0.01$).

SEM was used to test the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. The results showed that the data fit the model well (saturated model). The path coefficients of each variable are shown in Figure 2. When moral disengagement was the mediating variable, interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy were the dependent variables, and dark personality traits were the independent variables, the effect size of the overall model was significant ($R^2 = 0.13, p < 0.001; R^2 = 0.21, p < 0.001$). The standardized estimates for direct and indirect effects and the corresponding 95% CIs are shown in Table 2. The direct effect of Machiavellianism on interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy was significant (estimate_{inter} = 0.16, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.06, 0.26]; estimate_{intra} = 0.21, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.09, 0.33]). The indirect relation between Machiavellianism and interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was significant (estimate_{inter} = 0.04, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.07]; estimate_{intra} = 0.05, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.09]). The proportions of the indirect effect to the total effect were 20% and 19.23%, respectively. The mediating effect size between Machiavellianism and interpersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was 0.25, and the mediating effect size between Machiavellianism and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was 0.24. The results revealed that moral disengagement partially mediated the link between Machiavellianism and interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. The direct effect of psychopathy on interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy was not significant ($ps > 0.05$). The indirect relation between psychopathy and interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was significant (estimate_{inter} = 0.03, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.05]; estimate_{intra} = 0.04, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.07]). The proportions of the indirect effect relative to the total effect were 30% and 28.57%, respectively. The mediating effect size between psychopathy and

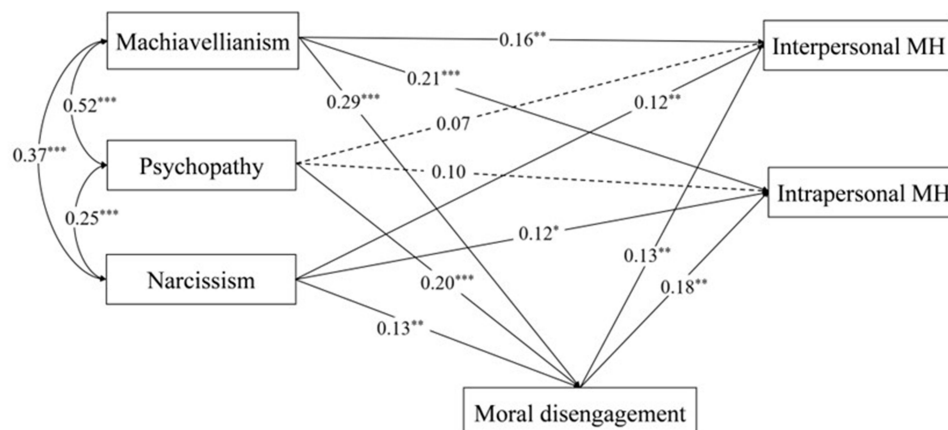


Figure 2 A structural equation model examining the relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy with moral disengagement as the mediator.

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Abbreviation: MH, moral hypocrisy.

Table 2 Standardized Effects, Corresponding 95% Bias-Corrected Bootstrap CIs, and Effect Sizes

	Indirect Effect			Direct Effect			R_M
	Estimate	95%Lower	95%Upper	Estimate	95%Lower	95%Upper	
Machiavellianism—Interpersonal MH	0.04**	0.015	0.069	0.16**	0.056	0.255	0.25
Machiavellianism—Intrapersonal MH	0.05**	0.024	0.092	0.21***	0.094	0.326	0.24
Psychopathy—Interpersonal MH	0.03*	0.009	0.051	0.07	−0.020	0.172	0.43
Psychopathy—Intrapersonal MH	0.04**	0.015	0.068	0.10	−0.029	0.211	0.40
Narcissism—Interpersonal MH	0.02*	0.005	0.040	0.12**	0.053	0.193	0.17
Narcissism—Intrapersonal MH	0.02*	0.007	0.052	0.12*	0.013	0.220	0.17

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Abbreviation: MH, moral hypocrisy.

interpersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was 0.43, and the mediating effect size between psychopathy and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was 0.4. The results revealed that moral disengagement fully mediated the link between psychopathy and moral hypocrisy. The direct effect of narcissism on interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy was significant (estimate $_{inter} = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.19]; estimate $_{intra} = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.22]). The indirect relation between narcissism and interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was significant (estimate $_{inter} = 0.02$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.04]; estimate $_{intra} = 0.02$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.05]). The proportions of the indirect effect to the total effect were both 14.29%. The mediating effect size between narcissism and interpersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was 0.17, and the mediating effect size between narcissism and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement was 0.17. The results revealed that moral disengagement partially mediated the link between narcissism and interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy.

Discussion

This study provides dual verification of the influence of dark personality traits on moral hypocrisy at both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. First, individuals scoring high on Machiavellianism exhibit high levels of both interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. This may be because individuals with high Machiavellianism scores manipulate, exploit, and disregard others' feelings to achieve personal gain and enhance their reputation.^{59,60} They shape their moral image by harshly criticizing and demanding from others, thus demonstrating high levels of interpersonal moral hypocrisy. In order to profit while maintaining their reputation, individuals scoring high on Machiavellianism engage in covert unethical behavior through elaborate planning,⁶¹ thus exhibiting high levels of intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. Second, individuals scoring high on psychopathy display high levels of interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. This may be because individuals with high psychopathy scores have poor self-control,⁶² leading to selfish moral double standards and deceitful behavior when faced with temptation.^{1,14} Therefore, psychopathy positively predicts interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. Finally, individuals scoring high on narcissism exhibit high levels of intrapersonal moral hypocrisy, which is consistent with previous research findings.⁴⁵ One possible explanation for this result is that narcissistic individuals lack empathy and intimate relationships, which are driving forces for moral behavior.³¹ Lacking these motivators, narcissistic individuals exhibit fewer moral behaviors, and even when they do, their motivation is not to help others. Narcissistic individuals are self-centered and often maintain their reputation and gain social approval by enhancing positive self-evaluation and disparaging others in interpersonal interactions.^{63,64} Hence, narcissism positively predicts interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. The results of this study indicated that the effect sizes of the three dark personality traits in predicting moral hypocrisy ranged between small and medium. This may be due to the presence of potential mediating variables between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. The exclusion of mediating variables from the model could result in the model's inability to fully capture the impact of dark personality traits on moral hypocrisy. This provides clues for further exploration of mediation effects. It is also possible that other unconsidered variables (such as confounding variables) may have influenced moral hypocrisy.

The study found that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. The effect size of the mediational model was at a lower-medium level. This suggests that moral disengagement is a potential mediating variable. Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism have an indirect impact on moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement. This result is similar to findings from previous studies.³⁷ A possible explanation for this result is that individuals with higher scores in dark personality traits are more likely to disengage morally, justifying behaviors that do not align with their moral standards, thereby exhibiting high levels of moral hypocrisy. This finding is consistent with social cognitive theory.³⁵ Bandura, from the perspective of social cognitive theory, attempted to use moral disengagement to explain the underlying psychological processes.^{35,43} Moral disengagement is the cognitive tendency of individuals to rationalize unethical behavior by shirking moral responsibility.^{44,65} This cognitive mechanism of rationalization encourages individuals to engage in moral hypocrisy.⁶⁶ This is because moral disengagement allows individuals to pursue their own interests without self-blame, undermining moral self-regulation,³⁵ thereby promoting moral hypocrisy.^{44,67} Furthermore, dark personality traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) have been identified as significant predictors and precursors of moral disengagement.^{42,68,69} Individuals with high scores on dark personality traits tend to disregard others' feelings, exhibit callousness, and lack empathy.¹² Previous research has shown that individuals with these characteristics may be more likely to engage in moral disengagement.³⁹ Individuals who score higher in Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism tend to employ moral disengagement strategies due to their higher levels of moral disengagement, leading them to exhibit higher levels of moral hypocrisy.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are four primary limitations in this study. First, this study establishes only a correlational relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. Future research could explore causal relationships through experimental manipulation or longitudinal studies. Second, this study focused solely on the cognitive processes linking dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. Future research should explore the emotional and motivational dimensions more comprehensively. Third, due to the similar strength of the correlation between moral disengagement and moral hypocrisy and that between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy, the model proposing moral disengagement as a mediating variable in this study lacks sufficient support. Future research could use time series data to test this model. Fourth, although our findings indicate that psychopathy indirectly influences moral hypocrisy through moral disengagement, it does not exert a direct effect. Machiavellianism and narcissism can directly predict moral hypocrisy, as well as influence moral hypocrisy through the mediating variable of moral disengagement. Therefore, we are reluctant to conclude that psychopathy's effect on moral hypocrisy is mediated by moral disengagement. That may be the case, but it may also be mediated by other factors working in the opposite direction. Further research is needed to explore such possible confounders.

Conclusion and Implications

The current study found that (1) dark personality traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) significantly positively predict interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy; (2) moral disengagement mediates the relationship between dark personality traits and interpersonal and intrapersonal moral hypocrisy. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy, as well as the mediating role of moral disengagement. This provides new insights for effectively preventing and intervening in moral hypocrisy among college students. As this study focused solely on college students, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other populations.

There are several theoretical implications. First, our research extends the study of personality and moral hypocrisy. Yu et al (2024) have explored the impact of the Big Five personality traits on moral hypocrisy.³⁷ Almagor et al (1995) argued that there are limitations in studying personality traits through the Big Five framework.⁷⁰ For instance, the Big Five personality traits are derived from lexical analyses of adjectives, which predominantly focus on positive traits and lack sufficient analysis of negative adjectives.⁷¹ Consequently, the Big Five traits primarily describe the brighter side of personality but fail to capture its darker aspects.⁷² This study investigates the influence of dark personality traits on moral hypocrisy from the perspective of personality's darker side, thus supplementing and enriching the exploration of factors influencing moral hypocrisy. Second, this study not only enhances understanding of the inner logical relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy but also clarifies how dark personality traits influence moral hypocrisy. The findings make it possible to intervene in moral disengagement to improve moral hypocrisy. Third, this

study provides valuable insights for future research on the relationship between dark personality traits and moral hypocrisy. The results indicate that Machiavellianism and narcissism have both direct and indirect effects on moral hypocrisy, whereas psychopathy exerts only an indirect effect. This suggests that the influence of psychopathy on moral hypocrisy may require further investigation. Moreover, there are also several practical implications. This study provides some suggestions for preventing and intervening in moral hypocrisy. First, parents and teachers should focus on cultivating healthy personalities in students to prevent moral hypocrisy. Our research found that dark personality traits are risk factors influencing moral hypocrisy. Although personality is relatively stable, it is not immutable. Personality could undergo appropriate changes under the influence of the environment. Second, educators and parents, especially when dealing with college students with higher scores in dark personality traits, could use empathy training, such as role-playing,⁷³ to reduce students' use of moral disengagement strategies, thereby lowering the level of moral hypocrisy.

Data Sharing Statement

The datasets generated for this study are available on request to the corresponding author.

Ethical Approval

This investigation was approved by the ethics committees of Jilin University and followed the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided written informed consent.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants in this study.

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Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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