



ON A SCALE FROM “TOM” TO “JERRY,” WHAT IS YOUR PERSONALITY LIKE?

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:



VERDI
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Meet your new classmates, Tom and Jerry. When you are sad, Jerry is the type of friend that will come up to you and hug you. Tom, on the other hand, is more likely to laugh at you and make you feel silly for feeling sad. Tom and Jerry think and behave differently; that is, they have different personalities. People’s personalities are made up of several personality traits. Some of these personality traits are generally seen as positive (so-called “light” traits) and some are generally seen as negative (so-called “dark” traits), although it is more complicated than that and we all have a mix of both. In this article, we discuss the personalities of Tom and Jerry and the differences and similarities between them. We will also help you to investigate your own personality, to find out if you are more like Tom or Jerry. Lastly, we will talk about how Tom became Tom and how Jerry became Jerry, and whether either of their personalities can change with time.

PERSONALITY

Someone's way of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

Personality traits are the unique ingredients that make us who we are. They help explain why people act the way they do and why we are all a little different.

PSYCHOLOGIST

Someone who studies why people think, feel, and behave the way they do. They help us learn more about our thoughts and feelings and when we need someone to talk to.

LIGHT TRIAD

Three personality traits that are seen as rather desirable. These traits include seeing the good in others, caring a lot about others, and not using others for their benefit.

WHAT IS PERSONALITY?

Meet your new classmates, Tom and Jerry. Jerry tends to help his classmates with their homework, share his lunch, and hug his friends when they are sad. Tom tends to laugh at his classmates, call them names, and take their pencils without asking. Is there someone in your school that sounds a lot like Tom or Jerry? It is likely that you can think of kids that you would say are often helpful, fair, or kind, and others that you would say are sometimes selfish, rude or mean. These words are examples used to describe people's **personalities**. Personality is all about how a person thinks, feels, and behaves throughout their life. The words that we use to describe personality are referred to as **personality traits** [1]. Learning about personality helps us understand our own and other people's actions and feelings. Scientists have observed that some personality traits, such as being helpful or sweet, are related to being happier in life. Other traits, such as being rude or mean, are related to being less happy in life. **Psychologists** (scientists who study the ways that people think, feel, and behave) decided to group some of these personality traits based on how they can influence our lives. They called the traits that influence life positively "light" and those that influence life negatively "dark." Scientists love to divide things into categories such as light and dark. By creating these categories, scientists are better able to describe someone's personality in detail. For example, if you had to describe what you had for lunch today, describing it using big categories like "fruit" or "sweets" or specific characteristics like "soft" or "red" makes it so much easier compared to if you only had one or two words to describe your lunch. The same thing holds true for scientists that are trying to understand personality.

THE LIGHT SIDE OF PERSONALITY

A group of scientists who were interested in understanding people's strengths and positive qualities discovered three personality traits that they believe reflect the good in people. They called these three traits the **Light Triad** (Figure 1A) [2]. The Light Triad includes the traits faith in humanity, humanism, and Kantianism. People who have a lot of faith in humanity tend to see the good in people and can forgive and trust others easily. People with a lot of humanism tend to treat other people with kindness and respect (Figure 1B). Lastly, people with a lot of Kantianism are generally honest and do not use others for their benefit. Jerry is a good example of someone who has a lot of Light Triad in his personality. Jerry is nice to all his classmates, he does not lie, and he apologizes when he has hurt someone. There are many advantages to having lots of "lightness" in your personality. For example, scientists have observed that people who are higher on the Light Triad tend to be more accepting of others, more enthusiastic, and even happier with their lives.

Figure 1

(A) The Light Triad is a group of three personality traits that scientists believe reflect the good in people: humanism, Kantianism, and faith in humanity. (B) People have different levels of “light” qualities in their personalities. For example, Jerry would score relatively high on the humanism scale, as he tends to treat other people with kindness and respect. Tom would score relatively low on the Humanism scale, as he tends to be unfriendly toward his peers.

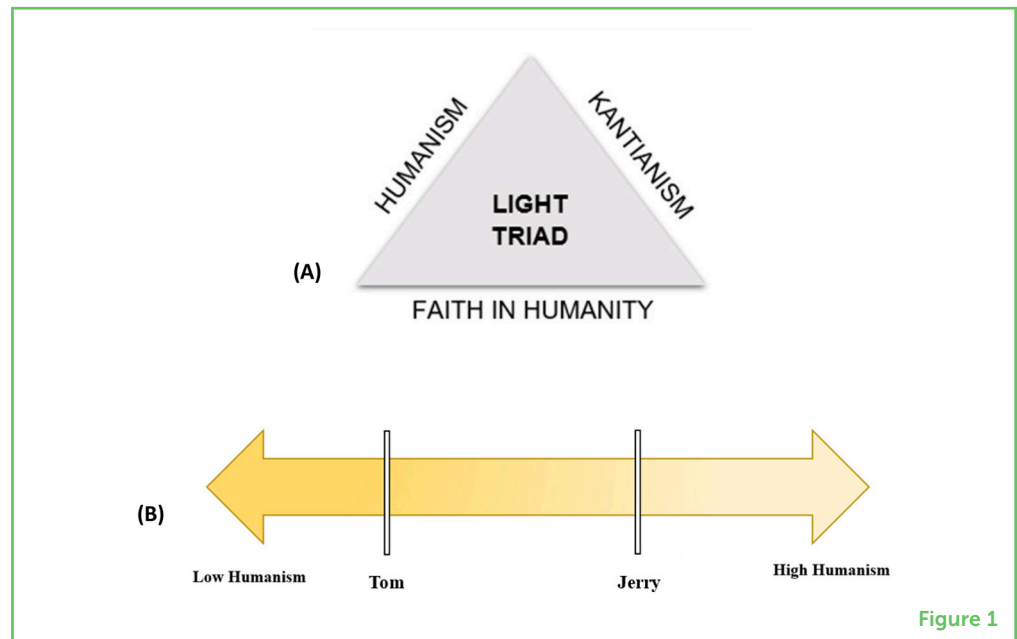


Figure 1

DARK TRIAD

Three personality traits that are seen as rather undesirable. These traits include not caring as much about how others feel and maybe even doing things that could hurt others.

THE DARK SIDE OF PERSONALITY

But what about the people you know who are a little bit like Tom? Such people might not care so much about the feelings of others and may find it hard to understand how their actions make others feel. They generally do not feel badly when they harm others in some way, and they often do not feel the need to apologize for their actions. People like Tom frequently do not believe that other people in the world are good or nice. Scientists have grouped three of these Tom-like traits and refer to them as the **Dark Triad**: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Figure 2A) [2]. People with lots of narcissism usually try to attract a lot of attention to themselves. They want others to look up to them and want everything to be about them (Figure 2B). People that have lots of Machiavellianism in their personalities tend to be manipulative and try to make everything go their way. Finally, people with lots of psychopathy may hurt others and may care very little about how other people feel about their actions or behavior. However, not everything about these dark traits is *bad*. Dark personality traits can be helpful, too! For example, Tom’s narcissism pushes him to do his best in school and to get good grades, in the hope that the other kids will look up to him as a result.

MEASURING THE LIGHT AND DARK SIDES OF PERSONALITY

Are you curious about your personality? To measure light and dark personality traits, psychologists may ask people how much they recognize themselves in certain statements.

Examples of light personality traits [2] are:

Figure 2

(A) The Dark Triad consists of the traits of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. (B) Most people's personalities are not all light or dark—people usually have some light traits and some dark traits, in different quantities. For example, Tom would score relatively high on the narcissism scale, as he tries to attract a lot of attention to himself and wants everything to be about him, but Jerry would scale relatively low. However, Tom's narcissism could also be helpful to him as people who score relatively high on the narcissism scale, generally have lots of self-confidence.

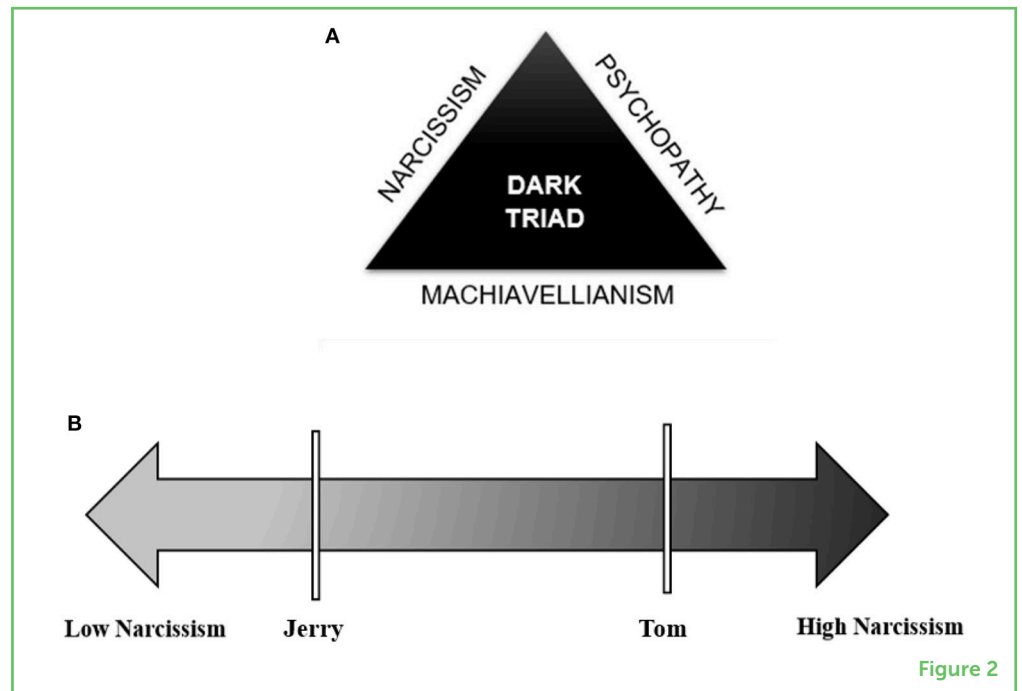


Figure 2

- "I am quick to forgive people who have hurt me"
- "I think people are mostly good"
- "I tend to applaud the successes of other people"

Examples of dark personality traits [3] are:

- "Many group activities tend to be dull without me"
- "You should wait for the right time to get back at people"
- "I'll say anything to get what I want"

Jerry would recognize himself most in the first three statements, Tom feels more at home reading the last three statements. On a scale from Tom to Jerry, how much do you recognize yourself in each of these statements?

WHERE DO OUR PERSONALITY TRAITS COME FROM?

But where do light and dark personality traits come from in the first place? Personality traits are influenced by two factors: **genes** and environment and, more importantly, the way these two interact with each other. Let us first talk about genes. You might have noticed that you have some similarities with your parents, siblings, or even grandparents. You might look alike, behave similarly, or like the same types of activities. Similarities shared with family members are partly due to genes. In terms of the second factor, environment, think about where you live, the interactions with your parents and friends, and all the things you have already experienced in your life. Where we spend

GENES

Pieces of DNA that carry information, including information about our personality traits, that is passed from parents to children.

GENE-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTIONS

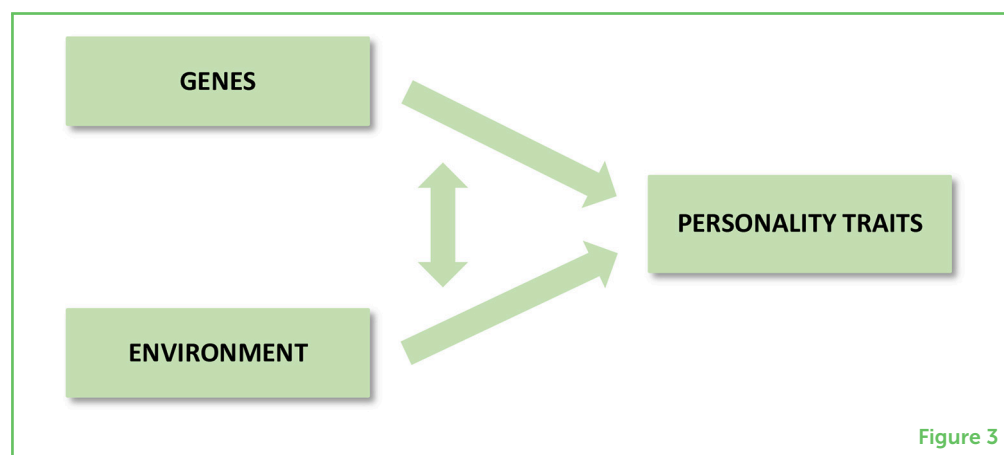
A given set of genes may lead to different traits, depending on environmental factors like where a person lives and who they spend time with. Both factors influence each other.

Figure 3

Personality is formed from a combination of genes and the environment interacting with each other. Just as inheriting genes that make you tall and athletic can contribute to your potential to become a professional basketball player, you can inherit genes that influence your personality. But where you live and who you interact with can play a role, too. For example, growing up in a supportive and loving family environment can foster light traits like kindness and empathy.

our time and the people we spend it with influence how we feel or think about things.

But how exactly do genes and the environment influence each other? Scientists refer to this as **gene-environment interactions** (Figure 3) [4]. To understand gene-environment interactions, let us consider how likely it is for you to become a professional basketball player. Imagine that you are naturally tall and athletic, and that you have high endurance. These characteristics have to do with your *genes*. Now imagine that, on top of these traits, your parents are always encouraging you to work hard, push yourself, and not give up when things get hard. These elements are part of your *environment*. Either your genes or your environment alone could increase your chances of becoming a professional basketball player, but if these two things come together, your chances increase much more!



STABILITY OF PERSONALITY

For a long time, scientists thought that personalities were set in stone and would not change over time. More recently, they have changed their minds—they have discovered that, while a lot of the personality remains stable, even as we grow older, personality can change a little bit [5]. For instance, scientists have discovered that, as we grow older, our dark traits tend to become less dominant. In other words, as we grow older, our hair turns gray and so do our personalities!

CONCLUSION

People possess many personality traits. Some personality traits are viewed more positively, the so-called “light” traits, while others are viewed more negatively, the so-called “dark” traits. The question is not whether Tom, Jerry, you, or I have light or dark personality traits, but rather, how many light and dark traits we have in our personalities and *how much* of each of these traits we have. Just

like everyone's fingerprints are unique, so is everyone's personality: everyone has a unique mix of personality traits in different quantities! The interaction between our genes and our environments influences what our personalities are like. And, as we grow older, our personalities may change a little bit. However, it is safe to say that *all of us* have a little bit of Tom *and* a little bit of Jerry as part of our personalities.

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SUBMITTED: 16 September 2022; **ACCEPTED:** 26 October 2023;
PUBLISHED ONLINE: 15 November 2023.

EDITOR: Gideon Paul Caplovitz, University of Nevada, Reno, United States

SCIENCE MENTORS: Grant Fairchild and Isabella McGowen

CITATION: Henriquez N, Hochheuser P, Kotzamani M, Romanelli I, Prinzie P and Van der Hallen R (2023) On a Scale From “Tom” to “Jerry,” What Is Your Personality Like? *Front. Young Minds* 11:974853. doi: 10.3389/frym.2023.974853

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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YOUNG REVIEWERS



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Fifth Grade students at Verdi Elementary love Science. Verdi, Nevada is a little community squished up against the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the Truckee River, which borders the California/Nevada state line. Verdi Elementary School is a cool place. Our school mascot is the Mule Deer as we have a resident herd of deer frequent the area around our school, often slowing traffic down as they cross the road! Verdi Fifth Graders love hands on science. Learning about the brain and neuroscience in conjunction with getting to see the actual brains was very exciting for the students. We knew a little bit, because we are studying systems, ecosystems, and systems of the body this year.

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Natacha Henriquez is a clinical psychology master's student at Erasmus University of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. She thoroughly enjoys learning about people and their tangled web of experiences. In the future, she envisions herself conducting interesting research and seeing patients. Aside from psychology, her interests include sustainability, dance, running, and watching nature documentaries on Netflix!



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Pauline Hochheuser is a clinical psychology master's student at Erasmus University of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. She specializes in social and organizational psychology and interns as a recruiter. She is particularly interested in the many ties connected to mental health. Soon, she will start her psychotherapist training. Outside of her studies, she likes to spend time with friends and cook.



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Marianna Kotzamani is a clinical psychology master's student at Erasmus University of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Ever since she can remember, she has been curious about why people act and feel the way they do. This is why she decided to study psychology. She also loves animals and nature. She can see herself volunteering in a rehabilitation center for injured wild animals. Her hobbies include playing the guitar and singing, watching nature documentaries, and traveling. She would love to see as much of the world as possible.



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Ilaria Romanelli is a psychotherapist in training and is working on a research project about pathological personality at Erasmus University Rotterdam. She thinks it is important and fascinating to learn more about how our minds work—not only to understand ourselves better but also to provide good treatment plans. During her spare time, she likes to read, cook, and visit new places!



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Peter Prinzie is a full professor in clinical psychology at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. His interests include personality, personality development, and parenting. He is the principal investigator of a longitudinal study on development: <http://www.personalitydevelopmentcollaborative.org/project-page-fsppd/>.



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Ruth Van der Hallen is an assistant professor in clinical psychology at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam in The Netherlands. Her interests include personality, coping, resilience, trauma, suicide, and emerging research methods. As such, she investigates how each of us deals with difficult circumstances and what works best for whom. *vanderhallen@essb.eur.nl