



A protean approach to social influence: Dark Triad personalities and social influence tactics [☆]

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ABSTRACT

To avoid detection, those high on Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) may adopt a protean approach to interpersonal influence. We show the Dark Triad traits correlate with a number of unique tactics of influence (Study 1; $N = 259$). We show this protean approach was insensitive to differences in targets of manipulation (Study 2; $N = 296$). When forced to choose one tactic to solve different adaptive problems, the Dark Triad traits were correlated with unique tactical choices (Study 3; $N = 268$). We show these associations are generally robust to controlling for the Big Five and participants' sex (Study 1 and 2). We discuss the theoretical implications of these findings for both life history and cheater-detection theories.

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1. Introduction

How do people like Bernie Madoff and characters like James Bond influence others? How are they able to be successful when they embody the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002)? Most research has treated these traits as bad for individuals and society (Kowalski, 2001). Indeed, these traits are linked to antisocial tendencies like dishonesty (Lee & Ashton, 2005), aggressiveness (Jones & Paulhus, 2010), disagreeableness (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and alcohol, cigarette, drug use (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010). Despite these apparently antisocial correlates, evolutionary psychologists suggest that even undesirable personality traits can be adaptive (i.e., providing solutions to problems like mating or survival), but may be so only on a shorter timescale (Buss, 2009). In the present study, we attempt to understand how those high on the Dark Triad traits may enact a successful fast life strategy.

Life history theory proposes that individual differences are emergent solutions to adaptive problems that are activated by key social and environmental events (Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). Natural selection may have shaped individuals to adopt mutualistic or antagonistic social strategies in response to differing socioecological conditions (Figueredo et al., 2006). Unfortunately, little is known about the tactical ways individuals enact an antagonistic life

strategy. Narcissism is linked to a number of tactics of social influence (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), those high on the Dark Triad are selfish, competitive, and strategic (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010; Jones & Paulhus, 2010), and Machiavellianism is characterized by interpersonal manipulation (Christie & Geis, 1970). This suggests to us that these traits might be part of a “cheater strategy” (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Mealey, 1995).

Taking an evolutionary perspective, we ask, “What is the primary adaptive challenge of anyone enacting a cheater strategy?” The cheater is successful in as much as he/she wins in a co-evolutionary arms race with cheater-detection mechanisms (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Cummins, 1999). Most research on cheater-detection is focused on those who would be cheated, not on those who are doing the cheating. The challenge for cheaters may be to avoid detection over repeated exchanges. We would argue that a powerful way to avoid detection is to use a “whatever-it-takes” attitude towards social influence (Gunnthorsdottir, McCabe, & Smith, 2002). By not relying on any one strategy, cheaters may be able to avoid detection. If we assume that people are looking for—and are overly attentive to—patterns in the world, then being protean in the manipulation tactics they deploy may be adaptive. There is considerable advantage noted in the biological literature on the adaptive value of protean behavior or being unpredictable (Driver & Humphries, 1988). Thus, the Dark Triad traits are expected to correlate positively with multiple manipulation tactics.

In particular, we expect each trait to provide a unique approach to social influence, adding to the protean approach to social influence we described above. We expect tactics that are “colder” to be isolated to psychopathy because of the selfish, impulsive, and

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aggressive nature of those who embody this trait (Hare, 1996; Jones & Paulhus, 2010). The psychopath may use *seduction*, *coercion*, and *hardball* as means of getting her/his way, but these tactics alone likely come with considerable risk. These risks may be offset by other parts of the Dark Triad. Machiavellianism may provide for one important tactic that may have considerable efficacy and limited adverse effects. The tactic of *charm* may be characteristic of those high on Machiavellianism (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Similar to Machiavellianism, the narcissistic approach to social influence may provide more benefits than costs. Narcissism has been described as an approach-orientation (Foster & Trimm, 2008) and these individuals may be interested in pleasing others to gain external validation (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004). That is, they may do things in hopes of others viewing them favorably. In so doing, they may use tactics like *social comparison* and *reciprocity*.

In three studies, we examine how individuals characterized by the Dark Triad traits enact their life history strategy at the tactical level. Study 1 assesses the basic correlations between the Dark Triad and tactics of influence. Study 2 assesses the tactics people use when trying to influence four types of individuals. Study 3 examines the tactics people use when trying to influence four types of individuals in efforts of succeeding at four adaptive goals.

2. Study 1

As a manifestation of this protean approach to social influence, we expect the Dark Triad traits to be correlated with the use of numerous social influence tactics. As a composite, the Dark Triad should be correlated with a large number of tactical approaches. As individual traits, the Dark Triad should be associated with different tactics of manipulation.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 259 psychology students (28% male, 72% female) aged 18–55 years ($M = 21.12$, $SD = 5.65$) from the Southeastern US who received partial course credit for completing the surveys described below. Survey packets were completed in a series of four mass-testing sessions in a large lecture hall. Once participants completed the measures, they were debriefed and thanked for participating.

2.1.2. Measures

We used the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen, a 12-item measure of the Dark Triad with four items per subscale (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) with statements such as: “I tend to want others to admire me” (narcissism), “I tend to lack remorse” (psychopathy), and “I have used deceit or lied to get my way” (Machiavellianism). Items were averaged together to create an index of narcissism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$), Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .69$), psychopathy ($\alpha = .65$), and a single Dark Triad index of all three ($\alpha = .85$). The three Dark Triad traits were positively intercorrelated ($r_s = .34$ – $.60$, $p_s < .01$).

Participants were asked a series of questions which we modified to be gender-neutral (Buss, 1992). They were asked how much they used a given tactic (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) to influence others in general. For instance, the tactic of the *silent treatment* was assessed with items like, “Ignore her/him until he/she agrees to do it.” The tactic of *charm* was assessed with items like, “Act charming so he/she will do it.” The assessed tactics were *coercion* ($\alpha = .80$), *regression* ($\alpha = .90$), *reciprocity-reward* ($\alpha = .84$), *debasement* ($\alpha = .60$), *hardball* ($\alpha = .75$), *charm* ($\alpha = .76$), *reason* ($\alpha = .88$), the *silent treatment* ($\alpha = .91$), *pleasure induction* ($\alpha = .81$), *social*

Table 1

Zero-order correlations (and standardized regression coefficients) for the three Dark Triad traits predicting the use of 13 different influence tactics.

Variable	$r(\beta)$		
	Narcissism	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy
Coercion	.24 [*] (.19)	.19 [*] (−.03)	.28 [*] (.21 [*])
Responsibility Invocation	.17(.18)	.08(−.10)	.15(.12)
Hardball	.31 [*] (.09)	.42 [*] (.28 [*])	.35 [*] (.17)
Charm	.42 [*] (.24 [*])	.45 [*] (.33 [*])	.20 [*] (−.06)
Silent Treatment	.22 [*] (.14)	.22 [*] (.14)	.14(−.01)
Regression	.11(.10)	.08(−.01)	.12(.07)
Reciprocity	.26 [*] (.22 [*])	.19 [*] (.02)	.19 [*] (.08)
Pleasure Induction	−.14(.12)	.11(.05)	.01(−.04)
Debasement	.30 [*] (.23 [*])	.25 [*] (.05)	.24 [*] (.10)
Reason	.11(.12)	.06(.05)	−.05(−.12)
Social Comparison	.34 [*] (.30 [*])	.25 [*] (.04)	.17(.04)
Monetary Reward	.22 [*] (.13)	.23 [*] (.10)	.18(.08)
Seduction	.19(.02)	.29 [*] (.24 [*])	.21 [*] (.08)

^{*} $p < .001$.

comparison ($\alpha = .83$), *monetary reward* ($\alpha = .75$), and *responsibility invocation* ($\alpha = .72$). *Seduction* was included as an additional manipulation tactic. Participants were asked how much they tried to “seduce the person”, “flirt with the person”, and “suggest I might have sex with the person if he/she does what I want”. These items were averaged to create an index of seduction as an influence tactic ($\alpha = .79$).

2.2. Results

Table 1 contains correlations, Bonferroni-corrected for the increased Type 1 error ($p < .001$), between the Dark Triad traits and the use of different manipulation tactics. The Dark Triad measures were not correlated with the use of tactics like *pleasure induction*, *responsibility invocation*, *reason*, and *regression*. The remaining tactics, like *hardball* and *charm*, were positively correlated with the Dark Triad composite ($r_s = .15$ – $.44$, $p_s < .05$). Using multiple regression to control for shared variability among the Dark Triad traits, we isolated the correlations to individual traits. Confirming our predictions, *charm* was correlated to Machiavellianism and psychopathy, *coercion* was correlated to psychopathy, and *social comparison* was positively related to narcissism. Additionally, psychopathy was positively related to *hardball*, Machiavellianism was positively related to *seduction* and *hardball*, and narcissism was positively related to *debasement*, *charm*, *responsibility invocation*, and *coercion*.

The above relationships persisted even after controlling for participants' sex using partial correlations. The Dark Triad traits were correlated with virtually every tactic of influence ($p_r_s = .12$ – $.40$, $p_s < .05$). In the interest of space constraints, we report only the cases where the Dark Triad traits were not correlated with the use of tactics of influence. None of the traits were correlated with the use of *regression*. Psychopathy was not correlated with the use of the *silent treatment* and *pleasure induction*. Machiavellianism was not correlated with the use of *pleasure of induction* or *responsibility invocation*. A full correlation matrix can be obtained by contacting the first author.

3. Study 2

Because social influence does not occur in a vacuum, we sought to determine if those high on the Dark Triad traits varied their tactics of influence based on the target. We present individuals with four targets who they are told they need to get help from and assess the correlations between the Dark Triad and tactics of influence across these four targets.

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