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Contributions of psychopathic, narcissistic, Machiavellian, and sadistic personality traits to juvenile delinquency

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to assess the relative contributions of psychopathic, narcissistic, Machiavellian, and sadistic traits to delinquent behaviors in adolescents. Participants were 615 high-school students who completed self-report questionnaires. Psychopathic, narcissistic, Machiavellian, and sadistic traits were moderately correlated suggesting they may be overlapping but distinct constructs. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to control for other socio-familial or psychopathological risk factors. Psychopathic and sadistic traits were independent predictors of delinquent behaviors in boys only. These findings suggest the importance of studying the role of sadistic traits in juvenile delinquency.

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1. Introduction

Delinquent behavior among adolescents is associated with a multitude of risk factors (Kazdin, 1992; Loeber, Burke, Lahey, Winters, & Zera, 2000). Among the psychological factors, many dimensions of personality have been associated with juvenile delinquency. The present study focused on the contribution of socially aversive personality traits: psychopathic, narcissistic, Machiavellian and sadistic traits.

The role of psychopathic traits has been emphasized in the last decades. The classic clinical description considered psychopathy as a severe personality disorder centered on callousness and unemotionality (Cleckley, 1976). Levenson (1992) suggested conceptualizing psychopathy not as a categorical entity but as a dimension of personality. More recently, the concept of psychopathy has been extended to children and adolescents: antisocial youths with psychopathic traits have been shown to have a greater number, variety and severity of conduct problems in forensic, mental health and community samples (Salekin & Frick, 2005).

Narcissistic personality disorder is dominated by a grandiose sense of self-importance, a sense of superiority and lack of empathy. The association between narcissistic and psychopathic personality disorders has been emphasized by Kernberg (1975). Narcissistic personality traits have been found to be linked to conduct problems in children (Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003).

Machiavellianism has been described as a dispositional tendency to manipulate and exploit others (Christie & Geis, 1970). These authors have conceptualized Machiavellianism as a normal dimension of personality and have observed that respondents endorsing Machiavellian traits were more likely to behave in a cold and manipulative way in laboratory and real word studies. Machiavellianism has been recently linked to juvenile delinquency (Hadjar, Baier, Boehnke, & Hagan, 2007).

Psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism have been described as the 'Dark Triad' of personality (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). In a non clinical sample of college students, Paulhus and Williams found that males scored higher on all three of the 'Dark Triad' traits and that measures of these three personality traits were moderately inter-correlated, with Pearson's r ranging from .25 to .50, suggesting that they were overlapping but distinct constructs. No study to date has explored the association between the 'Dark Triad' personality traits and delinquency. Only one study (Vaughn, Newhill, DeLisi, Beaver, & Howard, 2008) found links between two measures of psychopathy (which had labels alluding to Machiavellianism and narcissism) and three misbehaviors in 94 delinquent girls.

Sadistic personality disorder is characterized by a pattern of cruelty, aggression and demeaning behavior. This diagnosis appeared in the DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) but was removed from the current version of the DSM. Although, research on sadistic personality disorder is on-going to this day, few studies have focused on this disorder in non-offender populations and in adolescents. High rates of sadistic personality disorder or traits have been found in adolescent psychiatric inpatients

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(Myers, Burket, & Husted, 2006) and in juvenile sexual homicide offenders (Myers & Monaco, 2000). In non-clinical, non-forensic youth populations, the rates of endorsement of sadistic personality disorder traits have been found to be quite high. In a sample of college students, the rate of sadistic personality disorder was 5.7% (Coolidge, Moor, Yamazaki, Stewart, & Segal, 2001). O'Meara, Davies, and Barnes-Holmes (2004) reported that 6.9% of a sample of 407 undergraduates considered themselves sadistic whereas 5.6% claimed to enjoy hurting others. However, so far no studies have explored the association between sadistic traits and delinquency in non-clinical, non-forensic adolescents. Furthermore, there have been no investigations of the relationship between sadistic traits and the 'Dark Triad' traits in adolescents.

The aim of the present study was to assess the relative contributions of the 'Dark Triad' and sadistic personality traits to adolescent delinquent behavior controlling for other major risk factors. A number of psychological and socio-familial risk factors have been identified including impulsiveness and sensation seeking, borderline personality disorder and traits, depression, substance use, social disadvantage, family problems such as poor attachment and parent-child discord, exposure to stressful life events and academic failure (Kazdin, 1992; Loeber et al., 2000).

In this study, we investigated the contribution of the 'Dark Triad' and sadistic traits to delinquent behavior in a non-clinical sample of high-school students after controlling for the main other psychological and socio-familial factors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were obtained from students attending eight randomly selected high schools in Toulouse, France. The sample consisted of 615 students (382 boys (62%); 233 girls (38%); mean age of boys = 16.8 ± 1.3 ; mean age of girls = 17 ± 1.3 , $p < .10$; age range = 14–21). Being free of charge, these public high schools were not discriminatory on the basis of income and admitted adolescents with diverse SES levels.

The questionnaires were administered in the classroom by a Master's level psychology student who presented the study and collected the questionnaires. The questionnaires were anonymous. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and signed a consent form. None of the students declined to participate in the study.

2.2. Measures¹

Delinquent behaviors were assessed with the Antisocial Behavior Scales (ABS, Schwab-Stone et al., 1999). In this study, only the two subscales assessing moderate delinquency and severe antisocial behavior were used. The respondents were asked to report on a 5-point scale how many times they had been involved in the described behaviors during the past year. Scores range from 0 (0 times) to 5 (5 times or more). Total scores range from 0 to 50.

Psychopathic traits were assessed using the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory which was developed for youths aged 12 and older (YPI; Andershed, Hodgins, & Tengström, 2007). The YPI is a 50-item self-report measure. In this study, we used only the 15-item Affective subscale measuring callous-unemotional traits (e.g., "I have the ability not to feel guilt and regret about things that I think

other people would feel guilty about") which is the core feature of psychopathic traits. Items are scored on a 5-point scale. The Affective subscale scores range from 15 to 60. Validation studies of the YPI have been conducted with a community sample of adolescents and a sample of delinquent adolescents (Andershed et al., 2007). The YPI showed good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent and predictive validity. In this sample, the Cronbach's α for the Affective subscale was .72.

The 16-item version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames, Rose, Anderson, & Cameron, 2006) is designed to measure narcissism in non-clinical populations. It contains 16 pairs of items, each consisting of two conflicting proposals between which the participant must choose (e.g., "I like to be the center of the attention" vs. "I prefer to blend in with the crowd"). Total scores range from 0 to 16. In the current study, Cronbach α was .79.

The Machiavellianism inventory (Mach IV) (Christie & Geis, 1970) is composed of 20 items, 10 referring to high Machiavellianism, and 10 indicating low Machiavellianism (e.g., "It is safest to assume that all people have a vicious streak and it will come out when they are given a choice"). Items are rated on a 6-point scale. Total scores range from 20 to 120. Although different factor structures have been described in the literature (Corzine, 1997), some recent studies still used the total score as it showed an acceptable internal consistency with α ranging from .69 to .74 (i.e., Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Lee & Ashton, 2005; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Internal consistency of the total scale was poor ($\alpha = .51$) in our sample.

The Hurting Scale (O'Meara et al., 2004) is a short version of the Sadistic Attitudes and Behavior Scale (SABS), a scale designed to assess sadistic traits (Davies & Hand, 2003). This scale was made up of 11 items of SABS that relate specifically to hurting behaviors or attitudes (e.g., "I enjoy seeing people hurt"; "I have humiliated others to keep them in line"). The scale is scored on a 4-point scale, with total scores ranging from 11 to 44. The Hurting Scale showed good construct validity (O'Meara et al., 2004). In our sample, Cronbach's α was .81.

We also used the Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (BSSS) (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978) ($\alpha = .66$ in our sample), the Barratt Impulsivity Scale (BIS-10) (Barratt, 1985) ($\alpha = .65$), the borderline personality disorder scale of the Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire, Fourth Edition (PDQ-4, Hyler, 1994) ($\alpha = .66$), and the short version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D 10; Andresen, Malmgren, Carter, & Patrick, 1994) ($\alpha = .74$). Cannabis and alcohol uses in the past 6 months were assessed on a 9-point rating scale ranging from 0 (no use) to 8 (more than once a day).

Socioeconomic status was assessed using the Family Affluence Scale (FAS, Currie et al., 2004) developed for the Health Behavior in School Aged Children (HBSC) surveys as a measure of family wealth. Life events were measured using the Adolescent Self-Rating Life Events Checklist (ASLEC; Liu, Liu, Yang, & Zhao, 1997). Low academic achievement was assessed through asking participants how many times they had repeated a class since beginning school. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was used to assess participants' attachment to parents ($\alpha = .77$).

3. Results

3.1. Delinquent Behaviors

Seventy percent of participants reported at least one delinquent behavior during the past year (77% boys vs. 59% girls). A higher percentage of boys compared to girls had already started a fight

¹ We used French validated versions of the questionnaires which have already been used in studies which appeared in indexed French and English-language journals with the exception of the Hurting scale which has not been yet validated. The French version of the Hurting scale resulted from a translation which has followed the usual rule of back translation.

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