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## Acquisitive or protective self-presentation of dark personalities? Associations among the Dark Triad and self-monitoring

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### ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) is associated with interpersonal manipulation which requires skills in navigating through social situations. Thus, positive relationships between the Dark Triad and self-monitoring (acquisitive: perceptiveness, impression management; protective: protective variability, protective social referencing) were hypothesized and examined in an online-study ( $N = 408$ ) with (canonical) correlations and factor analyses. Results indicated that narcissism was related especially to acquisitive, Machiavellianism to protective, and psychopathy to both forms of self-monitoring, which supports the view of distinct Dark Triad traits. Findings are discussed concerning different aspects of self-presentation.

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### 1. Introduction

People scoring highly on narcissism, Machiavellianism, and sub-clinical psychopathy<sup>1</sup> are known to maneuver smoothly through social situations to promote their self-serving interests with manipulation and exploitation of others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). To do so, they need perception- and behavior-based skills to monitor and control their social “performances”. The current work examines associations among dark traits and acquisitive versus protective self-monitoring to shed light on how dark personalities present themselves.

#### 1.1. The Dark Triad

Sub-clinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are referred to as the “Dark Triad” (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) due to moderate intercorrelations between their scales (e.g., Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006) and shared conceptual features (e.g., egocentricity, callousness, manipulation). Although “unificationist theories” propagate that the three traits are essentially identical or only slight variants of an underlying general dark personality factor, findings generally support the perspective of three distinct trait domains (Jones & Paulhus, 2010).

*Narcissism* is the tendency to employ overly favorable views of the self in different domains while generally holding negative views of others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists feel entitled to a better treatment than others due to their superiority and aim at gaining others' attention and admiration (Raskin & Terry, 1988). *Machiavellianism* is characterized by (a) cynical, pragmatic, misanthropic, and immoral beliefs, (b) emotional detachedness, (c) agentic and self-beneficial motives, (d) strategic long-term planning, (d) manipulation and exploitation, and (e) deception and duplicity (Christie & Geis, 1970; Rauthmann & Will, 2011). Machiavellians have a cold and realistic approach to life and interpersonal relationships (Jones & Paulhus, 2009, 2010) and they are generally suspicious of others (Christie & Geis, 1970). *Psychopathy*, conceptualized as both a pathological and sub-clinical trait domain (e.g., Hare, 1991; Levenson, 1992), has a primary (e.g., selfishness, callousness, lack of interpersonal affect, superficial charm, remorselessness, exploitation of others) and secondary form (anti-social lifestyle), but generally falls into four components (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2003): (a) impulsivity, thrill-seeking, and irresponsible behaviors, (b) deceitful behavior and interpersonal manipulation, (c) callousness and lack of affect, and (d) anti-social behaviors.

The Dark Triad traits are tied together by the phenotypical behavior of exploitative manipulation at the expense of communal welfare (Jones & Paulhus, 2010) although underlying processes and dynamics may differ. This makes dark traits socially relevant and interesting for psychological research. Indeed, dark personalities are often seen as sly, cunning, and reckless “social chameleons”

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<sup>1</sup> These are referred to as “dark personalities” (narcissists, Machiavellians, psychopaths). The terms are *not* used as diagnostic labels, but *only* as abbreviations for people who score highly on the respective personality dimensions.

using different tactics to get what they want (narcissism: attention and admiration; Machiavellianism: status and power; psychopathy: thrill and fun). This social maneuvering, however, would require skills in two domains (Thorndike, 1920): perceptual sensitivity and behavioral abilities. One has to be sensitive to expressive cues of others to understand how one's own behavior affects them (e.g., in a manipulation tactic), but also adjust one's demeanor accordingly.

### 1.2. Self-monitoring

A personality dimension capturing a perception- and behavior-based component of social skills is *self-monitoring*, the explicit observation, regulation, and control of one's public presentation to or impression on others in social/interpersonal situations, which was first outlined as a unidimensional construct (Snyder, 1974, 1987) and later revised with different components (Arkin, 1981; Wolfe, Lennox, & Cutler, 1986). Snyder's (1974) original Self-Monitoring Scale decomposes into facets of inconsistency, extraversion, and acting (e.g., Lennox, 1988), the latter two subsuming social skills. Arkin (1981) proposed a bimodal conceptualization with hope for gaining social rewards and success, later interpreted as *acquisitive self-monitoring*, versus fear of social rejection, later interpreted as *protective self-monitoring*. Wolfe et al. (1986) offered in the Revised Self-Monitoring Scale the acquisitive self-monitoring facets sensitivity to expressive behavior of others (*perceptiveness*) and the ability to modify self-presentation (*impression management*), which map onto perception and action in social competences (Thorndike, 1920), and in the Concern for Appropriateness Scale the protective self-monitoring facets *protective variability* (also: inconsistency, cross-situational variability) and *protective social comparison* (also: attention to social comparison information; *protective social referencing*), which map onto inconsistency dimensions.

## 2. The present study

Self-monitors track others' states in order to dovetail their demeanor. This "social chameleon behavior" can be a basis of successful manipulation and potentially links self-monitoring to the Dark Triad: enhanced self-monitoring skills can also be used for selfish and malevolent purposes. The aim of the current study was to investigate associations among the Dark Triad and self-monitoring. It was hypothesized that all three Dark Triad traits would be positively associated with self-monitoring, in particular narcissism and psychopathy primarily with acquisitive and Machiavellianism with protective forms.

Snyder (1987) describes the "prototypical self-monitor" as "someone who treats interactions with others as dramatic performances designed to gain attention, make impressions, and at times entertain" (p. 178) and thus links it to the Dark Triad. Knowing how one affects others and adjusting one's behavior can be the basis of narcissistic charming behavior to gain attention and exert control. If self-monitoring abilities are used for the strategic display of certain behaviors to craft favorable impressions and a positive reputation, then associations with Machiavellianism can be expected as it is related to self-presentation tactics (Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Rauthmann & Will, 2011). If self-monitoring is used to manipulate, just for the fun of toying with people, then associations with psychopathy can be expected. Furthermore, self-monitors are stipulated to have a chameleon-like nature (Snyder, 1974), which possibly links self-monitoring to the Dark Triad.

As narcissism and psychopathy are both correlated with extraversion (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006), they should be more strongly associated with acquisitive self-monitoring which is related to

feeling rewarded in social situations when presenting oneself (Arkin, 1981). Particularly, narcissism should be associated with impression management as narcissists take joy in presenting themselves. Machiavellianism is usually not associated with extraversion or empathy, suggesting less ability of or motivation to decipher others' reactions to one's behaviors (perceptiveness). However, Machiavellianism should be associated with impression management as Machiavellians strive to form positive reputations. While narcissists and psychopaths may show low concern for appropriateness due to an inflated self-view or impulsiveness, Machiavellians should be motivated to tailor their behavior to the context and people present, which suggests a protective form of self-monitoring.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants and procedure

Items were administered online to  $N = 408$  students (316 women, 92 men; age:  $M = 22.81$ ,  $SD = 4.91$ , range: 18–65). The online-study was conducted as part of a psychology course, and participants earned credit points.

### 3.2. Instruments

#### 3.2.1. The Dark Triad

*Narcissism* (subscales: authority, vanity, superiority, exhibitionism, exploitation, entitlement) was measured on a five-point Likert scale (0 – *not like me at all* to 4 – *totally like me*) with a 17-item inventory based on Raskin and Terry's (1988) NPI scale (von Collani, 2008). Sum scores were computed. *Machiavellianism* was measured on a six-point Likert scale (0 – *not like me at all* to 5 – *totally like me*) with an 18-item scale based on Christie and Geis' (1970) scale (Henning & Six, 2008). Sum scores were computed. *Psychopathy* (subscales: impulsive thrill-seeking, interpersonal manipulation, cold affect) was measured on a five-point Likert scale (from 0 – *not like me at all* to 4 – *totally like me*) with the 30-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Williams et al., 2003). Means were computed.

#### 3.2.2. Self-Monitoring Scale by Laux and Renner (2002)

*Self-monitoring* was measured with four scales of six items, rated on a five-point Likert scale (0 – *totally disagree* to 4 – *totally agree*). Acquisitive self-monitoring had the scales perceptiveness (e.g., "In conversations, I am sensitive to even the slightest change in the facial expression of the person I am conversing with") and impression management (e.g. "I have the ability to control the way I come across to people, depending on the impression I wish to give them"); protective self-monitoring had protective variability (e.g., "I'm not always the person I pretend to be") and protective social referencing (e.g., "It's important for me to fit into the group I'm currently with"). Means were computed.

### 3.3. Statistical analyses

For a general picture of linear interrelationships, bivariate zero-order Pearson intercorrelations between all variables were computed. Further, canonical correlation analyses on domain- and facet-levels were computed to multivariately investigate linear and dimensional structures between the Dark Triad traits, treated as predictors, and self-monitoring skills, treated as outcome variables. Canonical correlations are used when associations among two sets of variables (multiple predictors and multiple criteria) are examined and yield canonical variates, showing the strength of the relationship and how many dimensions are needed to account for that

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