



Different routes to limited empathy in the sexes: Examining the links between the Dark Triad and empathy

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ABSTRACT

A fundamental observation regarding the Dark Triad traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) is that they are all associated with limited empathy. However, little is known about these relationships beyond some basics. In this study ($N = 352$), we asked three questions. What is the nature of the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and empathy? Does limited empathy account for sex differences in the Dark Triad? Are men and women low on empathy through different personality traits? The Dark Triad traits were all related to low levels of empathy even when controlling for the shared variance among the traits. Empathy rates mediated sex differences in different aspects of the Dark Triad but not others. Low empathy rates were related to narcissism in women but psychopathy in men, suggesting different routes to limited empathy for men and women high on the Dark Triad.

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1. Introduction

The Dark Triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism) are linked to numerous undesirable interpersonal outcomes like aggression (Jones & Paulhus, 2010) and limited self-control (Jonason & Tost, 2010). One particular disposition thought to link the Dark Triad traits is limited empathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). However, the research on the link between empathy and the Dark Triad tends to not account for the shared variance among the three, to not always assess all three traits, and fails to examine the manner by which empathy might interact with the sex of the participant to predict Dark Triad scores (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007). In this study, we attempt to address these three issues.

Although early work on the Dark Triad traits failed to account for the shared variance among the three when examining links to personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and mating (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009), the consensus now is rather clear. When trying to understand any one of the three, one must control for the shared variance with the other three. This allows for the correlations that correspond to any one of the traits to not be

contaminated by variance associated with the other two. For instance, such an analysis revealed that those high on psychopathy prefer to engage in booty-call relationships, those who are narcissistic liked to engage in a variety of relationships, and Machiavellianism was not associated with a particular relationship style (Jonason, Luévano, & Adams, 2012). However, if the Dark Triad traits all share at their core a sense of limited empathy, even after accounting for shared variance, each should be associated with it in their own right.

One characteristic limitation of much of the work on the Dark Triad is that it tends to consider overall scores on the traits (but see, McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2011). Although Machiavellianism (as measured by the MACH IV; Christie & Geis, 1970) appears to be one-dimensional (Hunter, Gerbing, & Boster, 1982), both narcissism (as measured with the NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and psychopathy (as measured with the SRP III; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press) are multidimensional (Ackerman et al., 2011; Falkenbach, Poythress, Falki, & Manchak, 2007; Hicks, Markon, Patrick, Krueger, & Newman, 2004; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Therefore, we present analyses using these dimensions along with the three primary Dark Triad traits.

Generally, researchers believe there are two factors of psychopathy (see Falkenbach et al., 2007; Hicks et al., 2004). The first factor is called primary or instrumental psychopathy. This factor contains the shallow affect, low empathy, and interpersonal coldness facets of psychopathy, and individuals with profound levels of these traits are sometimes referred to as “emotionally stable” psychopaths.

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The second factor is secondary or hostile/reactive psychopathy. This factor is composed of the socially manipulative and deviant facets of psychopathy and has been variously referred to as aggressive, impulsive, and neurotic psychopathy. As such we would predict that the avenue through which the Dark Triad is linked to limited empathy is through primary not secondary psychopathy.

The study of narcissism as a personality trait has a long history that predates even Freud. Today, the term narcissism often refers to a psychological personality disorder in the DSM-IV or a subclinical version of the trait, which is often studied by personality and social psychologists (e.g., Paulhus, 2001) and is comprised of grandiosity, need for admiration, lack of empathy, a sense of entitlement, and self-admiration. A great deal of research has been done on narcissism (see Campbell & Miller, 2011). A number of solutions exist to the items of the NPI; the most psychometrically robust appears to be the 3-dimensional model composed of Leadership/Authority, Grandiose Exhibitionism, and Entitlement/Exploitativeness (Ackerman et al., 2011). In order to be on top of dominance hierarchies, those high on the Leadership/Authority dimension of narcissism, may be assisted by having limited empathy. We predict that narcissism will be linked to limited empathy through the Leadership/Authority dimension.

Machiavellianism is characterized by a manipulative social style, one that tends to lack interpersonal understanding and is characterized by a “whatever it takes attitude” (Christie & Geis, 1970; Gunnthorsdottir, McCabe, & Smith, 2002; Jonason & Webster, 2012; Rauthmann, 2012). For instance, whether in work contexts (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012) or life in general (Jonason & Webster, 2012), those high on Machiavellianism (and the Dark Triad in general) appear to deploy a large number of tactics of social influence or manipulation; a range characterized by both “soft” and “hard” tactics. In order to pursue their manipulative social strategy, those high on Machiavellianism may be low on empathy in as much as high empathy would inhibit the successful exploitation of conspecifics. We predict that Machiavellianism will be negatively correlated with limited empathy.

Men reliably score higher on the Dark Triad than women do (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009) and women reliably score higher on empathy than men do (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004); differences we replicate here. However, this might mean that the nature of the correlations between these two traits might differ as a function of the sex of the participant as shown in other research (Jonason & Schmitt, 2012). We propose that there might be two different routes to limited empathy in the sexes. Psychopathy, which might tap a male-specific approach to life (Jonason, Slomski et al., 2012), might facilitate limited empathy in men more than in women. In contrast, because narcissism may not tap the same approach to life (Jonason, Luévano et al., 2012; Jonason & Tost, 2010), it might be freed up to facilitate limited empathy in women more than in men. Indeed, narcissism may represent a “lighter” personality trait than the other two in as much as those with narcissistic traits are rated less undesirable than those characterized by psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Rauthmann, 2012).

In addition, we examined the manner by which limited empathy might facilitate (i.e., statistically mediate) different aspects of the Dark Triad. Prior research has examined the manner by which the Dark Triad mediated different interpersonal behavior (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Jonason et al., 2009). Instead, we examine how empathy scores might be a mediating factor accounting for sex differences in Dark Triad. That is, it is not exactly that men and women differ on Dark Triad scores but, instead, it is because men have less empathy than women do that they are equipped to pursue the approach to life as seen in the Dark Triad.

A number of findings converge, leading us to believe that (1) the sex of the participant might moderate the relationship between the

Dark Triad and empathy and (2) the Dark Triad might mediate the sex difference in empathy in so much as low scores on the Dark Triad facilitate an empathic style in women more than men. In this report, we examine these possibilities. We also examine the correlations between the Dark Triad, its components, and the subscales of the components and empathy.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Three hundred and fifty-two volunteers (60 males; $M_{Age} = 25.10$, $SD_{Age} = 9.80$) participated in a larger online study entitled: “The Personality and Childhood Experiences Survey”. The survey was advertised to students in two universities in northwest England ($n = 153$) and through snowball sampling via email ($n = 199$).¹ The front page of the survey provided information on the nature of the study, as well as relevant ethical issues.

2.2. Measures

Narcissism was assessed with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988). For each item, participants chose one of two statements that they felt applied to them more. One statement reflected a narcissistic attitude (e.g., “I have a natural talent for influencing people”), whereas the other did not (e.g., “I am not good at influencing people”). In the present study, we used the three-factor structure (Ackerman et al., 2011), where the NPI is split into Grandiose Exhibitionism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$), Entitlement/Exploitativeness ($\alpha = .40$), and Leadership/Authority ($\alpha = .83$). As the Entitlement/Exploitativeness facet had poor internal consistency, we decided to omit the subscale from further analyses, but details are available upon request. The remaining two NPI subscales were significantly correlated ($r(352) = .77$, $p < .01$).

The 64-item Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (Paulhus et al., in press) was used to assess subclinical psychopathy. Participants rated how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as: “I enjoy driving at high speeds” and “I think I could beat a lie detector.” The items were averaged to create indices of secondary ($\alpha = .83$), primary ($\alpha = .85$), and general psychopathy ($\alpha = .90$). Primary and secondary were significantly correlated to each other ($r(352) = .62$, $p < .01$).

Machiavellianism was measured with the 20-item MACH-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970). Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) with statements such as: “It is hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there” and “People suffering from incurable diseases should have the choice of being put painlessly to death.” The items were averaged to create a Machiavellianism index ($\alpha = .77$).²

Empathy Quotient (EQ; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) was used to measure empathy. It is composed of 40 items. For instance participants were asked their agreement on statements like “Other people tell me I am good at understanding how they are feeling and what they are thinking” or “I can easily tell if someone else wants to enter a conversation” (1 = *strongly disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*). All of the questions are added together to form the participant’s EQ index ($\alpha = .90$).

¹ No differences were detected across sample type and thus results are collapsed across that distinction.

² We were unable to use a Dark Triad composite (Jonason et al., 2009). Psychopathy was correlated with Machiavellianism and narcissism (r 's = .15 and .58, p 's < .01), but Machiavellianism and narcissism were not correlated ($r = -.01$). This problem has occurred before (Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010) and was one reason the Dirty Dozen was created (Jonason & Webster, 2010).

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