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## The dark triad and normal personality traits

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### Abstract

Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy are often referred to as the ‘dark triad’ of personality. We examined the degree to which these constructs could be identified in 82 persons recruited from the general population, predicting that the dark triad would emerge as a single dimension denoting the cardinal interpersonal elements of primary psychopathy. We expected the primary psychopathy dimension to correlate negatively with Agreeableness (A) and Conscientiousness (C), whereas secondary psychopathy would be associated with Neuroticism (N). The negative correlation was found between primary psychopathy and A, but not with C. While the predicted correlation between secondary psychopathy and N was found, N was also positively associated with primary psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Factor analysis revealed that all measures of the dark triad loaded positively on the same factor, upon which A loaded negatively. Secondary psychopathy loaded positively on a second factor, together with N and (negatively) with C. These findings reiterate the distinguishing properties of secondary psychopathy, impulsivity and anti-social behaviour relative to primary psychopathy. Thus, even in the general population, the dark dimension of personality can be described in terms of low A, whereas much of the anti-social behaviour in normal persons appears underpinned by high N and low C.

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## 1. Introduction

The term ‘Dark Triad of Personality’ refers to three interrelated higher-order personality constructs—psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The majority of work conducted on psychopathy builds upon observations by Cleckley (1941/1988), operationalised in Hare’s revised Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R; Hare, 1991). The PCL-R and similar measures (e.g., Levenson’s self-report measure of psychopathy (LSRP; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995)) measure two facets of psychopathy. Factor 1 reflects primary psychopathy (e.g., selfishness, callousness, lack of interpersonal affect, superficial charm and remorselessness), factor 2 measures anti-social lifestyle and behaviours, and is akin to secondary psychopathy. It should be noted that researchers now propose three facets to core psychopathy; an arrogant and deceitful interpersonal style, deficient affective experience, and an impulsive and irresponsible behavioural style (Cooke & Michie, 2001).

Most research into psychopathy involves forensic populations such as prisoners and mentally disordered offenders. However, not all persons with primary and secondary psychopathy are in custody, and a literature has gradually emerged examining psychopathy-like traits in the general population (Board & Fritzon, 2005; Ross, Lutz, & Bailley, 2004). This suggests that if psychopathy is a trait, it should be apparent in non-offenders, and that it may even confer some kind of social advantage (Levenson, 1992). Examining psychopathy in the general population overcomes the sample bias of only seeing persons from prison settings, who are essentially homogeneous regarding socio-economic background and who are competitively disadvantaged intellectually, socially, and interpersonally. It is probable that the majority of institutionalised offenders are more inclined to secondary than primary psychopathy, with different dispositional mechanisms driving their transgressive behaviour (Lykken, 1995; McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998).

Machiavellianism (MACH) refers to interpersonal strategies that advocate self-interest, deception and manipulation. Christie and Geis (1970) examined the extent to which people use qualities such as deceit, flattery and emotional detachment to manipulate social and interpersonal interactions. While high MACHS are perceived to be more intelligent and attractive by their peers (Cherulnik, Way, Ames, & Hutto, 1981), MACH does not correlate with intelligence or measures of success in modern life such as income or status (Ames & Kidd, 1979; Hunt & Chonto, 1984). In experimental settings high MACHS frequently outperform low MACHS, whether this be bargaining and alliance forming (Christie & Geis, 1970), or assuming leadership in group situations (Cherulnik et al., 1981). As persons high in MACH are likely to exploit others and less likely to be concerned about other people beyond their own self-interest, MACH is predictably negatively correlated with empathy (Barnett & Thompson, 1985). Given these findings, one would expect a relationship between MACH and primary psychopathy.

The concept of narcissism derives from the psychodynamic formulations such as a pathological form of self-love (Freud, 1914), or personality development, whereby “narcissistic wounds” sustained in childhood may lead to an arrest in development and increased shame-driven rage (Kohut, 1977). It has been argued that the construct of narcissism is compromised by the contrast between vague psychoanalytic terminology and theory, and more observable elements of the concept (Bradlee & Emmons, 1991; Watson & Morris, 1991). However as a means of encapsulating

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