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Short Communication

Academic misconduct: An examination of its association with the dark triad and antisocial behavior

Marguerite Ternes*, Coady Babin, Amber Woodworth, Skye Stephens

Psychology Department, Saint Mary's University, 923 Robie Street, Halifax, NS B3H 3C3, Canada

A B S T R A C T

Previous research has shown clear relationships between academic misconduct and the dark triad personality traits (psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism). The present study aims to replicate and extend these findings by examining the relationship between different types of academic misconduct and the dark triad traits. We also explore the relationship between academic misconduct and antisocial behavior. Participants (330 university students) completed questionnaires measuring academic misconduct, the dark triad, impulsivity, and antisocial behavior. Most participants (77%) admitted committing at least one form of academic misconduct. When controlling for impulsivity, psychopathy was the only dark triad variable associated with academic misconduct. When primary psychopathy and secondary psychopathy were considered, only primary psychopathy was associated with academic misconduct. These results suggest that the core personality features of psychopathy may account for its link with academic misconduct, rather than features of social disinhibition and impulsivity. The antisocial behavior of rule breaking was associated with falsification, as well as high risk and low risk academic misconduct; social aggression was associated with copying; and none of the antisocial behaviors were associated with plagiarism. Based on these findings, it is suggested that academic misconduct is common in university students and instructors should take preventative measures to reduce these behaviors.

1. Introduction

Academic misconduct (AM) is a serious issue among university students, with upwards of 80% of university students admitting to AM (e.g., Babu, Joseph, & Sharmila, 2011; Marsden, Carroll, & Neil, 2005; Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010). The dark triad is a personality constellation associated with academic misconduct (Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006), composed of psychopathy (callous and unemotional traits, thrill seeking, impulsivity), narcissism (extreme self-involvement involving traits of arrogance, entitlement, and self-centeredness), and Machiavellianism (deceitful and manipulative behavior for the purposes of self-gain) (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Earlier research found that narcissism (Brunell, Staats, Barden, & Hupp, 2011) and psychopathy (Nathanson et al., 2006) were positively associated with AM; however, the dark personality traits were not considered together. In a comprehensive study, all three dark personality traits were positively correlated with AM, with psychopathy showing the strongest relationship (Williams et al., 2010). Elucidating the association between AM and the dark triad can help improve our understanding of who is most likely to engage in AM, which can guide prevention efforts.

1.1. Present study

We aimed to replicate and extend Williams et al.'s (2010) findings by: (1) examining different types of AM (e.g., cheating, plagiarism) to account for the heterogeneity in AM (Marsden et al., 2005); (2) examining both primary psychopathy (interpersonal and affective deficits) and secondary psychopathy (social deviance); and (3) controlling for impulsivity in analyses, as behavioral disinhibition is associated with AM (Giluk & Postlethwaite, 2015). We hypothesized that all three dark personality correlates would be associated with AM and psychopathy would have the strongest relationship with AM. We expected the dark triad to be more strongly associated with deliberate AM, such as cheating and falsification, than with plagiarism, which may occur due to inadequate understanding of citation practices.

The second objective was to examine the relationship between AM and antisocial behavior. Previous studies report a link between academic dishonesty and criminal behavior (Williams & Williams, 2012). These findings do not consider antisocial behavior that might not be criminal in nature, which would arguably be more common in university students. We hypothesized that AM would be associated with antisocial behavior and conducted exploratory analyses to examine

* Corresponding author.
 E-mail addresses: meg.ternes@smu.ca (M. Ternes), skye.stephens@smu.ca (S. Stephens).

Table 1
Intercorrelations among variables.

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Academic behavior													
1. Total	.80***	.76***	.67***	.66***	.75***	.18**	.02	.12*	.30***	.16**	.17**	.23***	.21***
2. High risk	–	.40***	.42***	.47***	.53***	.19***	.05	.12*	.27***	.17**	.15**	.21***	.26***
3. Copying		–	.43***	.36***	.45***	.09	−.03	.04	.15**	.10	.14*	.17***	.07
4. Plagiarism			–	.35***	.41***	.08	.01	.07	.22***	.07	.06	.11*	.10
5. Fabrication				–	.37***	.12*	.08	.13*	.30***	.06	.09	.10	.15**
6. Low risk					–	.16**	.01	.12*	.20***	.14*	.12*	.19**	.20***
Dark triad													
7. Psychopathy						–	.29***	.42***	.65***	.51***	.54***	.46***	.47***
8. Narcissism							–	.32***	.32***	−.00	.21***	.14*	.17**
9. Machiavellianism								–	.50***	.27***	.35***	.29***	.16**
Psychopathy													
10. Primary									–	.43***	.40***	.44***	.42***
11. Secondary										–	.46***	.29***	.39***
Antisocial behavior													
12. Physical aggression											–	.68***	.58***
13. Social aggression												–	.62***
14. Rule breaking													–

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

what types of AM would be associated with antisocial behavior.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Three-hundred thirty current post-secondary students were recruited through a university participant pool or through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). Participants received course credit for participation with those recruited through social media ineligible for compensation. Participants were on average 21.5 years old (SD = 4.1), 78.8% identified as female, and 76.7% identified as Caucasian (see Supplementary material for additional demographic information). The study was approved by the university ethics board.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Academic misconduct

The Academic Behavior Questionnaire is a 21-item self-report measure of AM (Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, & Armstead, 1996) where participants report whether they have committed different types of AM (see Supplementary material for questionnaire items). Although the questionnaire has good face validity, its validity and reliability has not been examined (Newstead et al., 1996). A factor analysis (see Supplementary materials) showed five sub-categories of AM: copying, fabrication, plagiarism, high-risk, and low-risk behaviors, similar to those found by Marsden et al. (2005), supporting the heterogeneity of AM behaviors.

2.2.2. Psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism

The Short Dark Triad (D3-Short) assesses psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Each scale contains nine statements (e.g., "it's not wise to tell your secrets"). Mean scores were calculated for each subscale with higher scores indicating higher levels of the trait. The D3-Short has shown good internal, external, and face validity (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The Cronbach's alphas in the present study were: .73 for psychopathy, .72 for narcissism, and .71 for Machiavellianism.

The Levenson's Self-Report Psychopathy scale (LSRP) is a 26-item measure assessing factor 1 (primary) and factor 2 (secondary) psychopathy (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995) with higher scores indicating higher levels of psychopathy. The LSRP has demonstrated good

convergent and discriminant validity, as well as internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999; Sellbom, 2011). Internal consistency for the LSRP in the present study was good, with α = .86 for primary and .72 for secondary psychopathy.

2.2.3. Impulsivity

The Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS-11, Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995) is a 30-item, self-report measure of impulsivity. Participants are asked to indicate how frequently behaviors occur (e.g., "I do things without thinking") with higher scores indicating greater impulsivity. The BIS-11 has shown strong internal consistency, test–retest reliability, and validity (Aichert et al., 2012; Stanford et al., 2009). In the present study, the BIS-11 demonstrated good internal consistency, α = .83.

2.2.4. Antisocial behavior

The Subtypes of Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire (STAB; Burt & Donnellan, 2009) is a 32-item, self-report measure of physical aggression, rule-breaking, and social aggression. Participants indicated how frequently they have engaged in different types of aggression (e.g. "have you ever blamed others"). Although the original STAB inquires about the past year, we asked participants how often they have engaged in these behaviors in their lifetime. The STAB has good factorial validity, internal consistency, and criterion validity (Burt & Donnellan, 2009). Internal consistency of the STAB in the present study was excellent, α = .94.

3. Results

AM was common, with 76.9% of participants committing at least one of the behaviors of AM (frequencies of AM behaviors contained in Supplementary material). The most frequently endorsed AM behaviors were copying (57.3% allowed another student to copy; 44.8% copied another student's coursework). The least frequently endorsed AM behavior was taking or having someone else take an exam for the student (3.0%).

Intercorrelations for study variables are presented in Table 1. In a series of multiple regressions, the relationship between AM and predictor variables were explored (see Table 2). When controlling for impulsivity, psychopathy was the only dark triad variable associated with AM, and only for the total score and the high-risk AM score. In a second set of multiple regressions only primary psychopathy was associated with AM after controlling for impulsivity.